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THE BLUE VENUS
by EMMETT McDOWELL
PLANET STORIES
WHAT HATH ME?
by HENRY KUTTNER
SPRING
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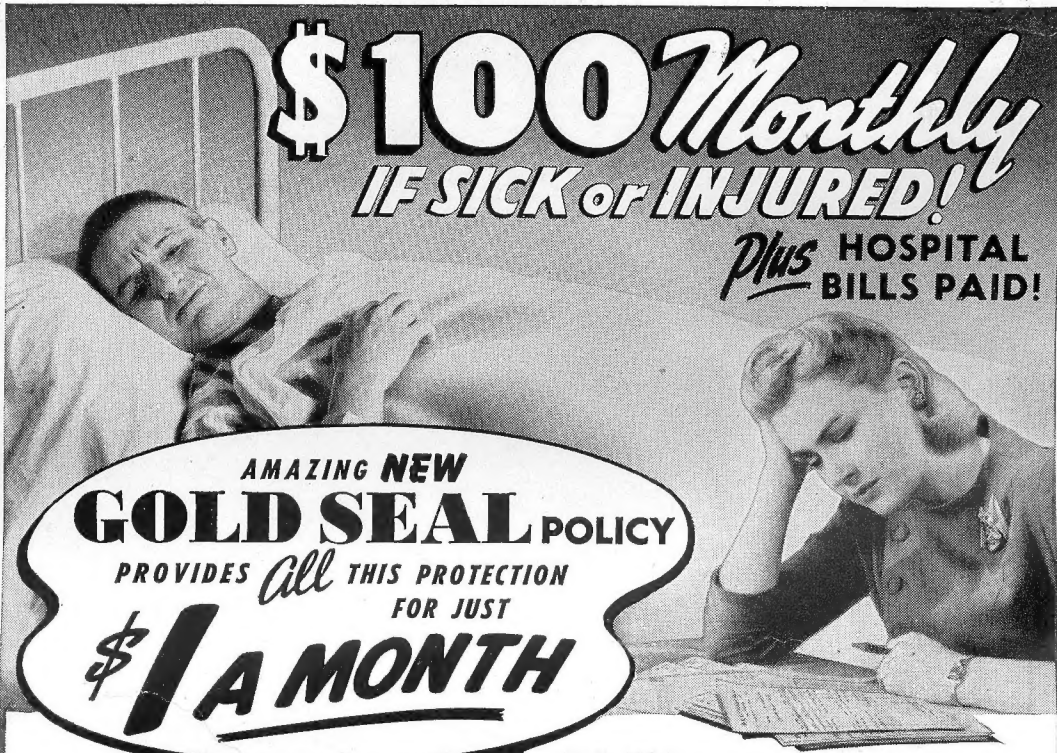
WHAT HATH ME?

An Experiment in
Thrallmery....by
HENRY KUTTNER

TWO BIG COMPLETE NOVELS

The Blue Venus || Engines OF THE Gods

by EMMETT McDOWELL by GARDNER F. FOX



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T. T. SCOTT, Pres.

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TWO GREAT NOVELS OF THE VOID

ENGINES OF THE GODS Gardner F. Fox 2

The engines were the wealth of Mars—but they could not be used until their secret was solved. Kortha and the evil Guantra fought and schemed for the knowledge—and the planet lay on the brink of destruction.

THE BLUE VENUS Emmett McDowell 88

The Renegade's men swept through the valleys of Venus, seeking a greed-maddened slaver who planned an experiment so cruel and barbaric it would crumble the very foundation of mankind.

A STIRRING NOVELET OF THE STARWAYS

WHAT HATH ME? Henry Kuttner 50

The thousand tiny eyes raced past him, glittering with alien ecstasy, shining brighter, ever brighter as they fed. He felt the life blood being sucked out of him.

FOUR SHORT STORIES OF THE FUTURE

SURVIVAL Basil Wells 30

Men found themselves suddenly in the swampy hell of Venus, fighting a weird battle for existence.

DEFENSE MECH Ray Bradbury 42

Man, man, how'd you get in a mess like this, in a rocket a million miles past the moon, shooting for Mars and danger and terror and maybe death.

ELECTRON EAT ELECTRON Noel Loomis 70

(Editor's note: When we had read through this in-a-class-by-itself story, we exclaimed, "Here's PLANET'S scoop on the world!")

CRISIS ON TITAN James R. Adams 79

Here they were, about to be blasted out of existence by strange inhabitants of a weird planet—and Staley was making like a baseball player!

P. S.'s DEPARTMENTS

P. S.'s FEATURE FLASH 47

THE RINGERS Guy Gifford 87

THE VIZIGRAPH 118

Skip this department if you can't take it.

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ENGINES of the GODS

By GARDNER F. FOX

The engine was the wealth of Mars. With it Kortha could save his people . . . or the evil Guantra could rule the Universe. But neither could use the machine until its secret was solved — so they fought and schemed for the knowledge, and their planet lay on the brink of destruction.

KORTHA the smith brooded out over the great red waste of desert. Men said Kortha was a genius. Men said he was the biggest man on Mars, and strong as an anthropoid ape. But Kortha brooded, because Kortha was a coward.

He was not afraid for himself. He was afraid of himself.

He looked at his sun-bronzed, hamlike hands, and shuddered; glistening beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. With those hands he had killed men, and had crippled his best friend for life.

Behind him gleamed the red *utta*-brick smithy and his small shack, and the tiny structure he called his laboratory. Swinging on his heel, he went away from the desert and into the smithy. He made the bellows leap, and the red flames spurt from the furnace. With the tongs he lifted a white-hot strip of metal and pounded on it with a sledge that an ordinary man would have found immovable.

In the clang and dance of hammer on anvil, he lost himself; listened only to the mad symphony of beaten metal instead of the still, small voices of his soul. The din of smitten steel jangling on the sootblackened anvil was the music that helped the giant forget his heart. His eyes gleamed red from the smarting flames, and he peered into their depths with green eyes wide and angry as though he beheld a corner of some lost hell.

He did not hear the muffled thunder of the 'copter that swung in a circle above his shack and swooped downward to dig its tires into the yielding sands. He did not see the door open, and who came out.

"Kortha," said a voice like a song.

He started then; looked up, brows furrowed. His eyes opened a trifle in astonishment.

"Ilse!" he whispered. The hammer fell from his grasp and bounced on the brick floor.

The girl with the hair like spun flax laughed softly and leaned against the wooden door. A white cloak clasped with a fiery ruby draped her shoulders. She wore gauze trousers with broad leather belt studded with jewels, and a bolero of *arket*-fur. Her white midriff was bare.

"You ran away, Kortha," she accused, her dark eyes gleaming like uncut sapphires from the tanned oval of her face. "You ran away from Hurlgut when he needed you. It took me a long time to learn where you had holed."

"Three years," said Kortha softly, wiping grimy hands on the white fur that clasped his hard loins beneath the leathern apron.

The girl ran her eyes over his massive frame in approval; saw shoulders a yard wide, and a chest and legs that were ridged in muscles. His long arms, tanned by years of exposure to a desert sun, were those of a king gorilla. She had seen Kortha snap an iron chain with those arms; had seen him break a man's back, and other things. Well did Ilse know the strength of Kortha, and the fact that she carried a heatgun in her cloak was mute evidence that she had knowledge of his mad, flare-hot temper.

Ilse sighed, "You could rule the Confederacy if you would."

"And own gems to garland your hair, and furs to swathe your body," he said.

His green eyes belied his voice: they drank up the sight of Ilse and her red mouth and her platinum hair as a miser drinks up the sight of his yellow gold.

"You idiot," she whispered. "You man-killing, tempestuous idiot! Zut forgive me, but I love you."



Illustration by KIEMLE

SHE straightened; faced him fully, eyes unwavering.

"They sent me to you, knowing that you might kill another. They—we need you, Kortha. Hurlgut lies on his back, unable to move. You put him there; you and those terrible arms of yours. But Hurlgut forgave you long ago. You know that! But you don't know—

"You don't know that Guantra keeps him there, with green *bessa*-mead and white women to amuse him, to make him forget that he rules Mars!"

Kortha started, and his lips drew back from his large white teeth, like the snarl of a hungry leopard. Deep in his corded throat a curse rumbled.

"Guantra. I remember him. An evil smell of a thing!"

"Guantra aspires to power. He has had himself declared Premier of the Council. He wants to turn Mars over to the victors in the Earth-Venus war, with himself as sole power on Mars. He plays politics like a master, does Guantra. Mars, with its rich ore-beds and mines—Mars, the prize of a war that does not concern her. Under a united Mars, she would take her place among the planets beside Earth and Venus as members of the Council of the Trinity. Under the Confederacy, Mars could have done this. Once it was almost accepted. Then—you ran away. And the Earthmen and the Venusians who feared your brains and your body, Kortha—they revoked their acceptance."

"They had agreed. I stayed that long."

"They refused to go through with it. They revoked their decision. They said—they said Mars was a hotbed of trouble, that it had no competent ruler to make its decisions, and enforce them!"

"Guantra," said Kortha bitterly, "wants to be that ruler. As Premier he stands an excellent chance of fulfilling his ambition."

Ilse came close to him, touched his hands with hers and clung. Her blue eyes stared anxiously up to his green ones.

"If you were to come back, and be that ruler," she breathed. "Kortha, Kortha, don't you see Mars needs you?"

Kortha looked past Ilse, out toward the red desert. Far in the haze of distance, against the black and jagged Mountains of Eternity, there was something white that shook and eddied in the heat waves rising

from the sands. Kortha knew it for forgotten Yassa, the city beyond recall. A dead city, that ate up travelers that went to it.

Kortha sighed, and looked at Ilse. Always had Kortha wanted to go to Yassa. There was a mystery about Yassa, a mystery that Kortha meant to solve. The time was now come when he could.

"Give me time," he said to Ilse. "I need time to think."

She looked at him and in the depths of her blue eyes there was an infinite sadness, a yearning.

"You lie, Kortha," she whispered, tears in her eyes. "You do not ever intend to return. Tell me why?"

He looked down at her and smiled. How could he tell *her*? The long uncut blonde hair that hung to his naked brown shoulders swayed a bit as he shook his head.

"I will, perhaps. But not yet."

Not yet you cannot tell her, Kortha. It is for her sake that you have buried yourself alive. But she would not understand. She is turning now and going away from you, perhaps forever.

Kortha walked across the sands behind her toward the 'copter. Once his great hands went out hungrily, then fell listlessly at his sides. Ilse was not for him. She was part of his brooding, the part that ached and stabbed with loneliness. Ilse was what made him a coward.

In the shadows of the flier the girl faced him once again. She stood perilously close, her eyes beseeching silently, and the fragrance of her hair and her curving body steamed in his nostrils.

"You are no hermit, Kortha. You need life. You need a woman. You need—me."

He nodded, staring at her face, drinking it in. He did not ever intend to see Ilse again, Ilse whom he loved, Ilse of the fair hair and the blue eyes and the body tanned brown by Sol.

Kortha stepped back and his shadow fell from hers. He lifted a hand, saying softly, "Goodbye."

With arms hanging to his thighs, he stood on the desert, watching until the dot that was the 'copter in the sky passed beyond the horizon. Wearily he swung about and went back to his hut.

He yanked down a gigantic steel hammer from the wall, breaking the thong that

held it to its nail. Gripping the hammer in his great hands, he swung it around his head, once, twice, in a flashing circle of blue-white light.

The walls crumpled when he hit them. The roof caved in and became the floor. Scraps of brick and metal fell to dance on the shuddering tiles. Fire leaped from the forge, caught hold and grew in a red frenzy. Red and huge in its crimson heat, Kortha battered and slammed his sledge, buckling even the wrought metalwork of his dwelling. This was his past, here before him. Sobbing, he fought it; and sobbing, watched as the fire came to consume it.

When the place lay black and smouldering, Kortha lifted his head and looked with his green eyes across the desert to Yassa.

A ROLLING something on the red sands caught his alert gaze. He smiled gently. A tumble. Probably Xax, who liked him. He watched it roll straight and fast over the desert, toward him.

Nature had made a perfect gyroscope in a tumble: a round ball of sharp, glistening spikes with a core of jelly that stayed level no matter how fast the powerful spikes rotated. Two long feelers, like skeletal arms, lay hidden in the spikes, but could stretch beyond them to clutch food seeking to escape. In the heart of the jelly was a strong brain.

Xax stopped, looking between his hard spikes at the blackened ruins.

"You leave the desert, Kortha?"

"I go to Yassa."

He felt the alarm of the tumble, and sighed as Xax shrilled, "You go to death! Only the tumblies have ever entered Yassa and—lived. There is a part of Yassa that even a tumble cannot penetrate. The white tower. The temple of dead, forgotten Zut."

Kortha hefted his big hammer and eyed its gleaming length.

"Kortha has never gone to Yassa," he whispered grimly.

It was not a boast; it was a statement of fact, a realization that there was only one Kortha.

Xax looked around him and saw the tire marks in the sand. He sat silent, looking up at the man who towered more than six feet above him.

"Someone was here," Xax said at last. "Ilse, wasn't it? You've told me enough of

her! The Confederacy needs you, doesn't it? And you won't go."

"I go to Yassa."

"Mad. Mad!"

"Not mad, Xax. So sane that I go to the one spot on Mars where I might bring her freedom, and a place in the planetary sun."

Xax digested that, squatting there.

At last he said, "You have not dwelt out here three years for nothing. You tried to hide from yourself at first, but you have learned things here on the desert."

A pain tugged and tore at Kortha's heart, and his lips were bitter as they smiled.

"You are clever, Xax. Smarter than Ilse."

"Ilse is a woman who loves you. Her love is inclined to blind her."

Kortha swung the hammer idly in his hand, eying the sunlight play across it. He took a stride toward Yassa, and another.

"Come, Xax," he called. "It is easy to talk and walk at the same time."

The tumble rolled along beside him. They went out into the hot red sands, their shadows before them. Kortha fixed his eyes on the white blot that was Yassa, and his long legs lengthened their stride. Sand crunched faintly under his sandalled feet, releasing tiny clouds of red dust at every step.

"Eons ago Mars was a cultured world, Xax. They had everything, our ancestors. Even you tumblies possessed your own civilization. The ancients had power, and weapons long since forgotten by the clans that descended from the survivors of the Great War.

"Wars are useless things, but they must be fought as long as there are men to quarrel. Who says otherwise is a fool. But the Great War—ahh, that *was* a war. They used things to fight with that we have long ago lost, and that Earth and Venus have never known. Mars is older than either and had more time to develop them. Our ancestors fought and destroyed: men and machines and cities. They left little. Among the things they did not leave was the knowledge of their arts and sciences. Mars had to build again, from scratch."

Their shadows crept behind them as they walked.

"Today Mars is a weak Confederacy of clans, ruled by a prince I crippled for life. Guantra hopes to rule that Confederacy,

but Guantra is a cautious man. He would never dare usurp the throne unless he were sure of victory. So sure of such a complete victory that he need fear neither Earth nor Venus.

"There is only one thing that would make Guantra so confident."

A pool of clear blue water lay in a little hollow ahead of them. Kortha put his palms to the hard sand that packed its edge and lowered himself to his belly. Immersing his lips in the cold spring water bubbling from hidden streams, he drank deeply. Xax lay to one side, watching him.

With the back of his hand, Kortha wiped his mouth, his eyes on the blood red sun dying in the desert a darker crimson on the horizon.

"We'll stay here for the night."

Kortha lay down and locked his hands behind his head. His golden hair spilled in a flood across the red sand. Xax rolled close to him.

"Two hundred years ago," said Kortha slowly, "the first Earthmen set foot on Mars. Those first colonists settled among us. Some of them married Martian girls. One of them wedded my great-great-grandmother. Mixed blood flows in my veins. I am brood of Earth and brood of Mars."

Xax said, "You keep me in suspense, Kortha. What one thing is there that will make Guantra confident?"

"A weapon, Xax. He needs a weapon. I think I know where he can find it. But to get back—

"They say that Earth ancestor of mine was a big man, and strong. He must have been, for it was he who whipped the clans into semblance of order, who established the Confederacy, who placed Hurlgut's ancestor on the throne.

"Earth made Mars rich in those early days, with demands for the metals of its mines and the stellus-ore to power their rocket ships. Earth was not strong enough to conquer us, then. It extended friendship, and traded. Fortunately, the Confederacy was ruled by wise men. They used their new riches to make the Confederacy strong, too."

Kortha sighed and watched Pheibos roll on upward into the vault of sky above him.

"Those early leaders left the Confederacy strong. I made it weak."

Kortha rolled onto his stomach, his head

buried in the crook of his naked forearm. He heard Xax snort, "You were the greatest of the lot!"

"I crippled Hurlgut in a fit of rage. I left him prey to Guantra." Kortha sighed "I ran away. It has been bitter, being out here, Xax. I had a long time to think. I hope my hermitdom has made me a wiser man. But I am afraid."

They were silent for long moments. Xax stirred restlessly and the clicking of his quills was like the rasping of many needles.

"Now Guantra will rule Mars," said Kortha hoarsely. "He will get his weapon unless I can stop him. He will wait until Earth and Venus are weakened by war. Then he will attack them. Ilse thinks he will turn Mars over to them, but that is not so! He wants to rule the Trinity of the three planets. In the end he will pull Mars down, for Mars is not ripe to rule—not yet. Not under Guantra, at any time."

Kortha closed his eyes, whispering, "I must stop Guantra. I must stop him without seeming to do so. For I cannot ever again take my place in the Confederacy. I am too dangerous."

Xax said softly, "Guantra has the army and the air fleet under his banner. You are one man against a world."

"I am Kortha," said the giant.

He rolled on his side and cuddled his head in his elbow.

An instant later, he was asleep.

Xax squatted, thinking.

II

FIVE days later a giant of a man and a round thing that rolled straight as a warlance beside him clambered up the sloping black rock side of the Mountains of Eternity.

Sunlight glinted from the smooth, dark stone that was polished bright as a mirror by the myriad dust storms that swept up from the desert, year after year. Heat shimmered all about them, rising slowly from the vast sand-bottom, reflected back from the igneous rock. Sweat wetted the hairs on the man's chest and forearms. It dripped from his face in tiny streams.

Kortha stood erect on a narrow footpath and looked above him. Upward the trail wound to dizzy heights. Set on a shelf of massy ebon stone beyond him lay Yassa,

like a white bowl of cool water in a black furnace.

Onward they climbed, and upward, their eyes fastened on the goal ahead of them.

They came together to the greenish bronze gates that tilted off their hinges and lay at grotesque angles. Down the street that stretched behind the gates walked Kortha, and with him swept the tumble.

Kortha stood still, nostrils distended.

"I smell danger."

Eyes alert, he walked on; but now he paced like the stalking cat, and the muscles in his long legs humped and swelled beneath the bronzed skin. His hammer hung loose in his hand, but then, the claws of a tiger are often sheathed.

A shadow dropped from above, swiftly.

Kortha whirled, side-stepping.

A huge king gorilla slammed an arm at him and screeched in anger as the smooth-skinned man eluded him. The gorilla gave his attention to alighting on the hard stones, and that was his mistake, for this smooth skin was on him like a charging buffalo, head lowered between his tremendous shoulders, and arms long as the gorilla's own shooting at him, hitting hard, like pistons.

Kortha was laughing harshly in his throat as he hit. He had not fought in three years, and the taste of a battle was as old wine to his lips. He needed this test, badly. He wanted to learn if his reflexes were as they used to be. Kortha balled a fist and drove it into the gorilla's ribs. He hit again, and again, and something snapped.

Blood flecked the wide, distorted mouth of the animal. His tiny eyes glared beneath shaggy brows. His dark brown coat bristled.

The gorilla had got his balance by now, and Kortha darted beneath a blow that could have ripped his head off. He swung low, then veered up sharply, legs planted apart, arms pliant and big hands grasping. He caught the gorilla by a wrist, whirled, taking the screaming animal on his back. He humped his hips and flung the beast from him, into the air. But he kept tight hold of its wrist, and snapped downward with all the fury of his titanic strength.

The gorilla hit the stones on its back. It screamed as its spine burst.

Kortha stared down at the writhing,

dying gorilla, saying, "So. This is the secret of Yassa. The extinct king gorilla is not extinct. Only an expedition in force could completely explore Yassa."

Xax shrilled, "They dare not touch a tumble. That is why we can come and go."

He proved his point an instant later when another gorilla dropped from a low roof. Xax rolled beneath the falling beast who screeched in agony as the tumble's long quills ripped into the pads of his feet. Chattering in pain, the gorilla ran off while Kortha laughed.

"You're a good companion to have at a time like this, Xax," he chuckled.

Xax clicked his needles. "We're coming to the Tower of Zut. A tumble can't fight what dwells in there."

Kortha said, "No living thing dwells there, Xax. And the dead cannot harm you."

THE glory that was Yassa burst on them as they rounded a corner and stood in the square of Zut. A massive building of translucent white jadestone loomed solitary in the square. The face of the temple, gleaming lucid in the sunlight, fronted toward them, broad and tall and tapering to a triangular crown far above. From its base four bulbous domes stretched backward, fanshaped, like blunted and misshapen fingers. The symmetry of the building was awesome. The ancient architect who designed it had been an artist as well as an engineer. It was a thing of beauty, as well as a place of terror.

Like a dark mouth set in the white face of the windowless tower gloomed a gate of shadows, open to the square. That yawning space was black with emptiness. There were no doors hung on hinges; only that sombre opening, silently menacing.

Kortha stood looking at it. The wind ruffled the white fur of his mantle. It stirred his amber hair and cooled the naked skin of arms and shoulders.

He lifted his hammer and shook it in the sunlight, and grinned.

He walked forward.

Xax spoke to him above the clicking of his needles on the broken flagging of the square, "Are you walking into that thing like a *yavit* to the trap?"

"Others have examined it before me, Xax. I have not heard that their examina-

tions saved them. Besides, if the death that lurks in the tower of Zut still lives, I have no need to fear Guantra."

They were quite close to the doorway now, and looking in they glimpsed something white and shining on the tiled floor. As they drew nearer, the heaps of white stuff grew plainer.

They were bones. Human bones: what was left of the skeletons of many men.

Kortha lifted his head to survey the doorway. His green eyes blazed with challenge, but their fire was controlled, and alert. He saw the entrance plain and severe in style, affording no clue as to the manner of its deadliness. From the way in which the walls shone, so clearly translucent with the hint of inner fires deep within them, he knew that the tower was built of *transvaline*, that rare building material whose secret was lost with so many others during the Great War.

In the walls two tall, faint strips of black shone dully: the doors of this queer adit.

Kortha swung his hammer in his hand and tossed it through the opening. The doors remained open, and the bolt of force that he half expected to sweep from somewhere at the hammer, remained hidden.

He grunted to Xax, "Come on. No sense wasting time out here, like dogs fretting before a bear's cave."

They passed the threshold together, and stood in a domed chamber, circular in shape, with another doorway beyond and opposite the entrance. There were words on the lintel above its arch.

"Science chamber," whispered Kortha, and started toward it.

Behind them was a metallic whisper, susurrating in the stillness. Kortha whirled and cursed and leaped. The doors closed before his shoulder struck their smooth black surface. He hit and bounced slightly, jarred. Kortha swore slowly, fluently, looking at the doors.

"How long will the air last?" wondered Xax.

"Longer than our bellies will stand the lack of food and drink. So this is the great tower of Zut. Sliding doors that imprison any who break a secret electric beam. Zut! I'd thought better of the Ancient Ones. This is really too simple. Find the beam and send a current along it, and the doors'll open again."

Kortha swung on his heel, going down the hall and into the Science Chamber. Standing motionless on the threshold, he ran keen eyes into the huge chamber.

He chuckled. He laughed. Head flung back, he roared hoarse laughter to the trestled ceiling. He sobbed his delight, hands spread over his muscled loins, helpless with his mirth.

Xax clicked a question at him, impatient.

"It's Guantra," said Kortha when he could. "The fool. The utter fool. And he hopes to rule the Trinity. Look for yourself, Xax. Look at all these machines spread out before your eyes. The wealth of a planet is spread out for you. The greatest weapons the solar system has known are here. And Guantra has left them all!"

"How do you know Guantra has been here?"

"Down there. Observe the blacker spaces against the grey dust inches thick on the floor. Something rested there for ages, Xax. Gone now. Oh, Guantra was here, all right, probably with his entire science staff. They took two things away with them. Probably the simplest machines of the lot. Why did he leave the rest? Because the fools who man his science staff didn't know what in the world all these things are. Didn't know how to use them. Didn't have the slightest idea of what they are supposed to be. Zut, it's rich!"

"You may not know yourself," chided Xax.

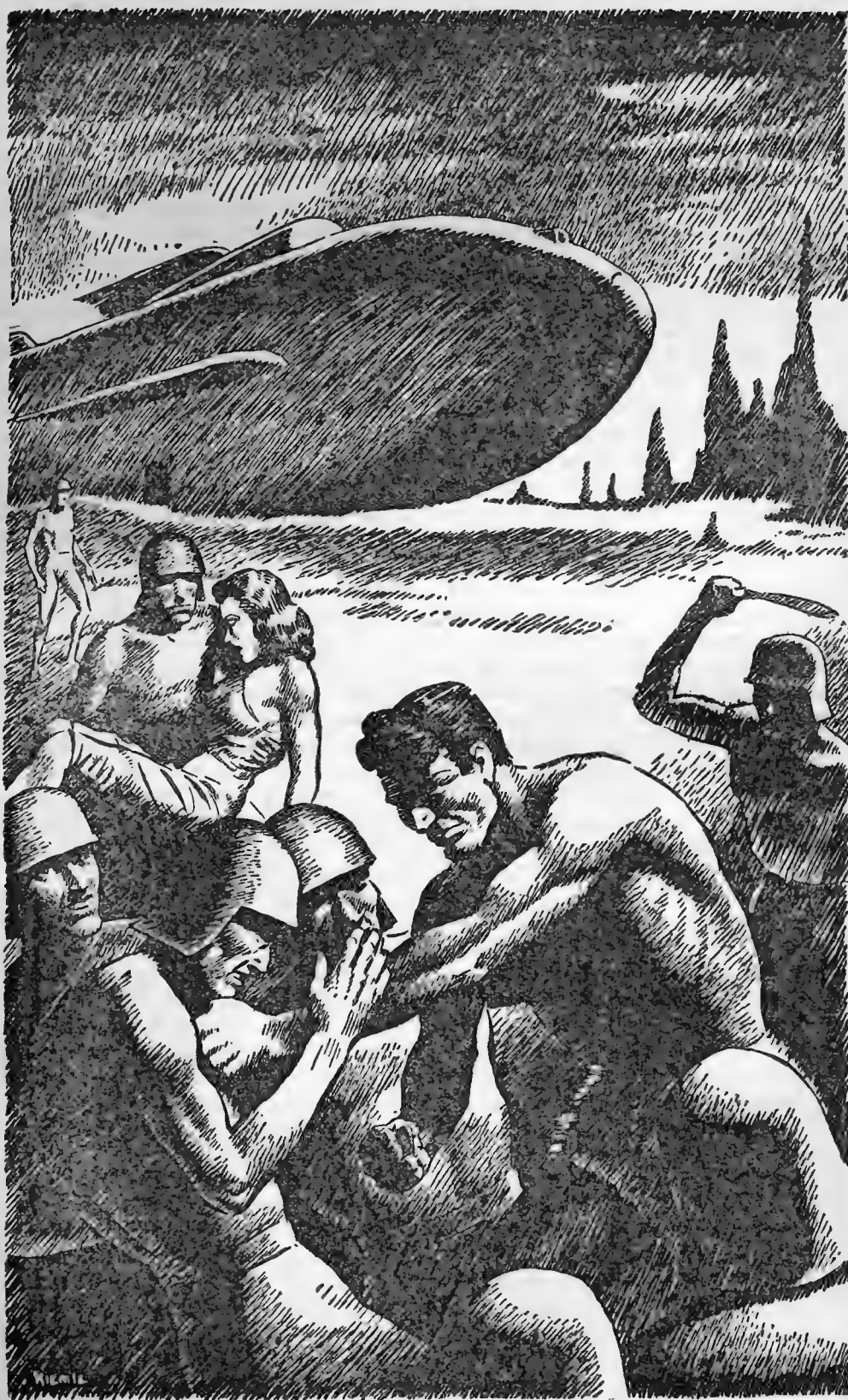
"If I had the resources of a science staff, I'd damn soon find out," Kortha grunted, wiping moist eyes. "No wonder Guantra can come to power—when Mars has idiots for a population."

HE was bitter and savage, thinking of Ilse and—himself.

"Men say you are a genius," Xax clicked. "It's not fair, comparing others to yourself."

"Bah!" snorted Kortha. "A man makes himself what he is. But let's not bandy words. I have work to do."

He walked down the aisles of this treasure house of metal machines. His quick green eyes studied condensers and generators, pausing to search the intricacy of bearings, or the purpose of bizarre couplings. Inventions of forgotten ages lay



before him, dim light shrouding dusty cables, and plasticite casings. Here were bulbous globes and straight, thin shanks of steel; there in shadowed niches rested wired engines and bulbed machines, silent and mysterious.

"Guantra and his staff took the more obvious machines, perhaps the ones that bore explanatory cards," said Kortha, walking softly in the dust. "These are more complex."

He came to a halt before a queer tangle of rings and wires and generator. Three metal bands floated in air between two looped magnetizers. Kortha rubbed at his jaw, thoughtfully, scowling. The pattern of the machine was utterly new, completely strange to him; yet there was about it a faint air of familiarity. The thing had no obvious purpose. It fired no missile. It had no in-take or out-let valves. It—

"Zut!" he whispered. "It only does one thing. It gives off vibrations!"

Xax merely looked at him. Kortha was saying excitedly, running hands over metal sides and rounded knobs, over cables and rings, "But don't you see? If a thing can be made to give off the proper vibrations, it can affect matter. It can cause a change in the electronic structure of a substance, by speeding up or slowing down the rate of electronic revolution around the atom.

"Remember the old legend about the beggar who had a queer machine strapped to his back? Everywhere he wandered he met harshness and ill treatment, until one night a woodchopper took him into his hut and fed and clothed him. The woodchopper kept him with him until the beggar was healthy again. As a reward, the beggar turned everything in the hut *into gold!*"

"Pfah," muttered Xax. "A myth."

"Myths are simply memories carried down from generation to generation. No, no, Xax. Where mankind has a myth, there is usually *some* truth behind it, no matter how distorted by time and innumerable retellings. It is the smoke that hints of the fire. I just wonder if this machine is the one that began that particular myth."

Kortha squatted and ran exploring fingers over wires and coils, making positive attachments and strengthening connections. He squinted up at the rings, motionless, rigid in the air, between the magnetizers. He grunted.

"Must get its power from the air. Maybe it feeds on oxygen or hydrogen. Or argon. Hell, I'm just guessing at this point. See if it works first. Then analyze it."

He looked around for an object; found a loose panel of carved wood on a perilously old table. Ripping off a section of the wood, he placed it before the machine. His fingers turned a knob.

A beam of shivering green light pulsed from the coils and hung motionless to a yard outward. Kortha kicked the block of wood into the beam.

"Zut!" he breathed softly.

The wood changed: grew red and warm, shimmering a brilliant crimson, pulsating as though from inner fires. It became opalescent, almost fluid in scarlet brilliance. Slowly the red became green, and then yellow. The bar hardened, the liquidity of its structure tensing into solidity.

Kortha stared with wide eyes at the bar, whispering, "Gold!"

"Gold," echoed Xax, awed.

KORTHAS grinned broadly, hefting the thing in his palm. "Pure gold. Heavy, but somewhat soft, Xax. I was right. Blessed be the mythmaker, for he shall help us find truth!"

"It can't be true," protested Xax, his faceted eyes glued to the amber bar in the giant's hand. "You don't turn one thing into another, not by just a—a color!"

"Of course not by a color. That green light was something that got down to rock bottom, affecting the very nature of the wood. What's so odd about it? All matter is composed of electrons. Those electrons move in certain orbits within the atom. If it is possible to alter the vibratory rate of those electrons—why, then your substance itself is changed. It is something else. In this case, it's gold."

The voice interrupted him. It came from the outer chamber: harshly gloating, unrelievedly triumphant.

It called: "Kortha. Come where I can see you, Kortha. I want to talk to you."

"Guantra," whispered Kortha, and ran.

He found the quartz-crystal television screen finally, perched in a niche in the hall, where it could command a view of the closed doors. Kortha went and stood before it. He drew back his lips, and spat.

THE image of the man in the screen recoiled slightly, then thrust forward again, pushing the lean hawk's face with jutting, black-bearded chin and hooked nose and slightly bald forehead almost to the limits of the screen. The thin lips twisted in a savage smile. The dark eyes glittered under thin brows.

"I have you, Kortha." At last, I have you where I want you. I have searched for a long time without success. Where did you hide yourself? Ah, well—it makes no difference. You are to die, Kortha, and I—Guantra!—am to be your executioner.

"Did you suspect that I learned the secret of Yassa, Kortha? If you did, and I think as much, you are right. It cost ten men's lives, but I learned it. It was a lethal ray that blasted whoever passed those black doors. We smashed it out of existence, reluctantly. It was a hellish thing. I would have given much to have saved it, but," sighing, "it could not be done. But I found other articles to take its place."

"Two of them," assented Kortha dryly.

Guantra seemed startled, then nodded. "Two, yes. A lightning-blaster and a—no, I'll not tell you the other. That is *my* secret . . . I see the lightning-blaster surprises you."

"Another myth," whispered Xax, looking up at Kortha.

"Myth?" puzzled Guantra, brows meeting over its hooked nose. "Oh. You mean the one concerning the weapons of the Great War. The rhyme that goes—

"They culled the lightnings from the sky,

"And summoned all who were to die—"

"A neat bit of doggerel, but let's talk of living men. Kortha, I know you for my enemy. If you were my friend, now—"

Guantra jerked suddenly, drawing back. His lean face looked tense, thoughtful. His thin lips drew down at the corners, and slowly curved into a smile. It was not a nice smile to see.

He whispered, "If you were my friend."

Kortha lifted his big hammer and showed it to Guantra.

"Talk no more of friendship between us, *yavit*," he said clearly.

But Guantra leaned forward and smiled again. His dark eyes were steady on the big man in the white fur harness, whose sun-browned skin seemed like smooth bronze against the bearskin.

"Zut love me, but you *will* be my friend, Kortha. Wait! I am sending men for you. You cannot fight me, for all Mars is at my beck. My men will bring you to me, and I will *make* you my friend!"

He flung back his head and laughed, and his mirth rang loud and harsh in wild, eerie peals. Listening to it, Kortha bared his teeth in a soundless snarl and shook his hammer, and said, "I would sooner be friends with a canalhound. Send your men, but they'll not find me. I'll be away, looking for the shortest route to your throat!"

Guantra grinned, "I'll forgive you that when you're my friend, Kortha. Don't think you can get free of the tower. The controls for those doors are under my fingers. A trusted guard watches the screen here, night and day. He summons me when any enter the tower. He was quite excited upon seeing you. Mars has not forgotten Kortha who reunited the clans.

"How Mars will worship a Kortha come to life! Mars will also worship Guantra who found you and gave you back to her. The crowds will go for you. Kortha the genius. Kortha the man-gorilla. Kortha the great.

"And Kortha will be—my friend!"

It was then that the giant swung the massive hammer against the quartz-crystal screen. It shattered into fragments that sounded like musical glass as they fell to the floor.

Kortha looked at Xax, and rested the hammer by a sandalled foot. His green eyes glittered, and his long yellow hair shook as he moved abruptly, turning on his heel.

"Guantra has his weapon now. He needed that weapon before he dared declare himself. So! A lightning-blaster. Now when Earth and Venus learn that Mars is a power to be reckoned with, they will seek Guantra's favor. Each will hasten to make peace and bid for his friendship. And Guantra will sell Mars for the highest offer. In a polite way, of course.

"If I can't stop him, he will. And Guantra has an army. And an air fleet."

Kortha laughed harshly, "I have two hands and a brain, and a hate for Guantra. Maybe that will even up the odds. Come, Xax. Stop talking to me."

Xax shrilled a chuckle and rolled along

with the fur-clad giant, back into the science hall. Kortha worked with his deft fingers, examining coils and rings, delving into the secrets of ages-ancient generators and condensers. He grunted and swore, and his brow was furrowed in thought. One engine he completely dismantled, but could make nothing of its function. Others he merely glanced at, passing them by.

"I'd need a laboratory to test them all," he said at last. "I just don't have the equipment. You can't determine uses or strengths or purposes with your naked fingertips."

He went and patted the ringed machine with his palms.

"We have no weapon but this, Xax. It will have to do."

"That?" choked the tumbler. "That's no weapon. It's just a—a luxury!"

Kortha knelt and began fastening wheels to the base of the machine. He said, "In our hands it will be a weapon. It will have to be, for Guantra is sending men and ships to capture us. When those doors roll open, his men are coming in for me."

The wheels screeched as they bore the weight of the big engine across the marble floor. Kortha's leg-muscles bunched and writhed under the pressure he exerted. His naked arms bulged, tightening under the smooth skin. Up the ramp went the machine to grate to a halt opposite the entrance doors.

Kortha lengthened the distance level of the beam, and wiped a forearm across his wet brow. He smiled mirthlessly, "Let them come, now. We're ready for them."

Xax shrilled, "You said we could escape by throwing a beam of light on the mechanism of the doors. Then why do we stay here?"

"Guantra has sent men to overcome me. If we escape, we'll be out in the open where they can overcome us at will. Here we have a chance. They have to come in that door. I'll have them all in front of me. I have to kill them all, Xax. Otherwise Guantra may learn where I've gone."

"He may still find out," the tumbler grumbled.

"I know. It's a chance I have to take."

THE drone of the fliers sounded sooner than Kortha had anticipated. He could imagine them circling above the ancient

city, swooping in to a landing in the square. A moment later he heard the drumming of feet on stone.

The doors rolled open effortlessly. Guantra's guards came in yelling, with guns in their hands, leaping for him; shouting loudly at sight of him.

Kortha put a hand on a lever, threw it down.

A beam lanced out at the doorway. It splashed its pale green color over the scarlet tunics and naked legs of the guards.

The guards changed color.

They glittered yellow, metallic. One or two of them were off balance. They fell with a ringing clangour on the marble floor.

Xax gasped, "Gold. They're all solid gold statues!"

"I told you it was a weapon," rasped Kortha, shoving the machine in front of him, wheeling it toward the square.

There were a few guards left, in front of the fliers. When they saw Kortha, they came running. One by one he picked them off; watched them fall harshly, bouncing a little on the cobblestones. They did not fire. Kortha realized Guantra must have been very explicit about wanting him taken alive.

When he stood alone in the square, Kortha lifted his hammer and brought it down on the glistening orifact. Metal danced and shattered under his blows. Casings split. Magnetizers fell apart. Bolts and shards of metallic rings jangled on the paving, clattering and rolling among the lichen-lifted flaggings.

"Guantra will never use that," said Kortha grimly.

He walked toward the fliers. One after the other, he smashed their radios; and the controls of every ship but one. Holding open the door of the last plane, he said to Xax, "Get in."

"Where are we going?"

"To find Ilse," answered Kortha, settling his big frame in the plasticine seat. His hands went forth to punch buttons and twist dials. The tubes behind him roared their power, shaking the entire ship. He taxied the flier across the square and yanked back hard on the repellever. The nose went up sharply, and riding the air currents on blunt wings, the flier rose above the ruins of white Yassa and aimed its prow at the desert.

Kortha slipped in the automatic controller, and ran fingers through his fur jacket.

"Ilse will know the politics I've missed in living on the desert for three years. She will know if we can raise a force strong enough to fight Guantra. We'll need men and money and ships. Guantra has cornered the market on those, right now."

"You wouldn't go to Ilse before. Why will you now?"

"Three years ago I crippled a man, Xax. Hurlgut, who was my best friend. It was in a fit of rage. I couldn't control my temper. And—I was afraid that some day I'd do something like that to Ilse. I couldn't afford to let that happen. I love her too much. There was only one thing to do, since I couldn't master my own emotions.

"I ran away. I came here across Syrtis Major to the Yassan desert because it is so far from life. Nothing exists away out here. If Hurlgut or Ilse were to send searching parties, it would be like looking for a sword out in the asteroid belt.

"I picked a good spot, all right. It took them three years to find me. They wouldn't have found me yet if I hadn't helped an occasional unfortunate who'd come to try his luck at mining in the Yassan sands."

"Mining?" puzzled Xax. "In the desert?"

"There's a lot of copper mixed into that sand. Some day I hope to learn why. Cliffs of metal abound on Mars. The cliffs around Ruuzol, for instance. But enough of that. Let me explain about myself. I came to the desert and lived alone. High hopes were mine that the silence and loneliness and my work would teach me control. I don't know how well I succeeded in that, but in another thing I did have success.

"On the long winter nights, I saw lights in Yassa, Xax. Man-made lights. Electritorches and solar-beams. Now everyone on Mars knows that Yassa is a deserted city, and deadly. Lights didn't belong there. I wanted to go to Yassa to see who walked its dead streets. But as a test, I curbed myself, fought my yearning. I mastered it. I wondered and puzzled, but I stayed on the desert. Some day I would go, but not yet. Finally the lights went away, and did not return.

"I know now that those lights were car-

ried by Guantra's science staff, who discovered the secret of the tower of Zut, and used it. They took away the weapons they could use and left the others, thinking no one could fathom their use. They thought me dead. Bah, the fools!

"Then when Ilse came for me, I realized the truth. Guantra had sent men to Yassa. But if I went to Yassa, I might prevent their taking anything of value from the city. I was too late!"

Xax shuddered at the glitter in the green eyes of this big giant.

"I did not think Guantra had taken anything. I know better now. Without a weapon, Guantra would not dare strike for power. By smashing every weapon in that Tower, I could have stopped him cold at one stroke. Then I could have returned to my smithy, in the desert, and lived out my life."

KORTHA sighed, and surveyed the craggy ground below. They were flying low over a barren plain where rocks lay yellow in the sun as far as they could see, like golden pebbles. Jagged red cliffs rose off to the right, shining dully like copper; to the left, a mesa of red-green stone lifted a flat top toward the sky. Between the mesa and the cliffs, the golden floor of the plain went on and on, endlessly.

Kortha increased the speed of the little flier, and sighed, "But now all that is changed. Guantra has his weapon, and I must find Ilse. We must raise a fleet to oppose him. I'm still afraid of myself, Xax. I may yet hurt Ilse, but I'll have to chance it. Mars is bigger than both of us!"

A dot in the sky to sunward of them grew bigger, loomed into a small flier. Kortha swore happily, seeing the emblazoned dragon on its prow.

"Ilse. She's come back to talk to me again."

He swung the ship toward her, anathematizing himself for having smashed its radio. He had meant it as a protective measure, to prevent Guantra from triangulating his position. It boomeranged, now. Ilse would see Guantra's rippled black star pennon on his own prow.

She fled from him like a startled fawn, but Guantra built good ships. Kortha overhauled her slowly, ducking her gun-blasts, swallow-darting. When she dove for a

cliffside, Kortha followed; and only expert piloting prevented them both from slamming the hulls of their ships against those coppery walls.

A shell from her rear electrogun ripped away a section of his fuselage before she saw him, big and white-furred, in the glass cabin. He saw her face go white, looking back at him. Ilse fought her controls, dropping toward the plain. Grinning wryly, fighting his ship that bucked with a hole in her side, Kortha followed her down.

She came running to him across the stones, her loose white bolero jacket blowing back, her straight long legs flashing brown in the sunlight, making shadowy grotesques ahead of her on the jagged rocks. Her red mouth shouted laughter at him, mixed with sobs.

He caught her up against him; bent to memorize her blue eyes, the soft cheeks that were moist with tears, the full scarlet mouth. Her platinum hair blew wild in the breeze.

Kortha drank a kiss from her wet mouth, and kept her crushed to him for moment after moment. Three years on the desert is a long time.

"Whew!" whispered Ilse, laughing up at him with lips and eyes, her nose crinkling a little.

She sobered suddenly; put soft hands to his cheeks, stroking them.

"You fly Guantra's ship. What happened?"

He told her, looking down into her eyes, moving his gaze from hair to lips, to cheeks and throat. She shuddered, listening, and he held her tighter.

"It's no use, Kortha," she said at last. "We can't fight the fleet that Guantra can muster. The fact that he has those weapons makes a lot of difference. I knew when I came for you that we were nearly beaten. You were our only hope. If Kortha could come back from the grave—there would be a psychological value to the thing. We might aim at strikes, at seducing men from Guantra's navy. Build ships on the sly, from Mare Cimmerium to Sinus Gomer. But now—"

Her shoulders drooped. Kortha scowled across at the red cliff crimson in the sunlight. It was true. The fleet that Guantra owned was the fleet that Kortha had built. Battleship and air-cruiser, he had blue-

printed their models, seen them swung into their launching-cradles. He had manned it with picked men. Nothing on Mars could match it, certainly; possibly nothing on Earth or Venus, either, with the exception of their vast space fleets. He sighed.

Xax shrilled a warning, clicking his needles.

From the south a huge grey battleflier rose grim and massive above the flat mesa. Sunlight disclosed its rippled black star pennon, and the gleaming guns, and the swarms of fighters covering its decks. Towering masts brooded down across the plains, giving the ship an aetherial look that its dark bulk belied.

Kortha laughed bitterly, "What use to talk of fleets now? That's Guantra's own flagship. He's come in person for me now. By some black magic, he's learned of what took place at Yassa. Probably took alarm when his radio calls went unanswered."

They ran across the stones for the small cruiser, kicking pebbles into life, making them roll and bounce. With big hands, Kortha tossed Ilse into the open door of the flier; swept in after her with a hard, swift leap. The door clanged behind them.

THE ship shuddered under a direct hit on her rear rockets. Kortha went flying, clutching at Ilse, dragging her down on him. His back met the far wall, and he cushioned her against his chest.

Kortha was on his feet, eyes blazing. His hand went to his hammer, hefting it, lifting it up and down, very slowly. He snarled a little, deep in his throat.

"He knows we're here. He's playing with us. He wants us alive."

"There's my plane. If we hurry—"

Across the stone-bottom, they saw the silvered hull of the little flier cave inward. Metal sides slivered, and splinters flew through the air.

"Guantra has good gunners," said Kortha drily. "Let's learn if his combat units are as good."

He drove the massy head of his hammer against the door, breaking it open. With Ilse in one arm he dropped to the rocks and walked away from the flier. Side by side, they stood and looked up at the gigantic ship that hovered yards above the plains. Men came swarming over its sides,

dropping like ants from ropes, leaping toward them.

Kortha saw they were unarmed. He tossed his hammer aside and grinned mercilessly, lips writhing back from strong white teeth.

Ilse looked up at him and shuddered. She had seen Kortha fight before.

He sprang to meet them, hamlike fists balled into twin maces. He broke a man's jaw with his first blow. With his second he snapped three ribs of an officer in a short green cloak. He hit again, and again, and everytime that his fists struck, bones cracked or splintered. Men shrieked there on the stones, trying to stand up to him.

Occasionally he unclasped his hands to grasp; and when his grip fell, clutching, the victim dropped with shredded limbs.

They were all around him now, grunting under his blows, screaming when he wrenched. Kortha danced like a temple harlot, twisting on his toes, slamming his long arms out, dropping his fists where they hurt the most: on jaw, on belly, on ribs. He laughed harshly as he fought; his eyes flared, and his nostrils quivered. The soft thudding of fists on flesh, and the sobs of air-hungry lungs orchestrated the battle.

It looked as though he would beat them all, for a moment. His great form was untouched, and men lay sprawled on the rocks all around him.

Then someone flung sand from a pouch. Kortha knew its bitter burn as it bit into his eyes. They welled with tears, but Kortha held them open, fighting the smart with all the surging energy of his will. To close them would make him helpless; yet the tears blinded him, too, and those he could not help.

The guards raged into him, goaded to desperation, hitting hard. Buffeted, blinded, swept off his feet, Kortha was hurled backward onto the stones. For long minutes he was the core of a shifting, sobbing, maddened group. A hand dug at his face, shoving it into sharp rocks.

Kortha arched his loins, thrusting hard, upwards, heaving men off. He came to his feet, blind, striking out, shouting as he felt flesh pulp beneath his fists.

Something slammed across his temple, bouncing off.

Kortha pitched face downward, hearing Ilse screaming.

III

KORTHa floated in clouds, bodiless.

Fragrance drifted past in tendrils of white mist, curling and crawling with scented life. Through the mist came a battleship with Guantra seated on it, laughing at him. A silken garment dyed with scarlet and magenta flickered past, obscuring Guantra. Wrapped in the silk was Ilse, dancing for him, trailing a cape of moonlight behind her white shoulders, above the multicolored scarves. The clouds shifted beneath him, causing him to fall. He dropped, faster and faster.

Golden men caught him, carried him on their shoulders. They led him to a wall and chained his wrist to a red-hot manacle—

It was Ilse who held his wrist in her hand; Ilse bending above him, crystal tears quivering on her long amber lashes.

"Kortha! Thank Zut. You've lain so still."

He was in a bed. He grunted as he sat up. Ilse fought him, tried to force him down, saying, "The doctor said you had the constitution of a desert boar. What you went through would have killed ten ordinary men. But lie still, lie still. The wards are filled with the men you've wrecked—"

She laughed and sobbed, fighting him. But Kortha put her aside easily, asking, "Where is he? Where is the smell?"

"I am here, Kortha," said Guantra from the doorway where he stood, a gun steady in his hand.

The gun was aimed at Ilse. Kortha was a little too far away to jump, but the muscles on his legs and arms writhed like snakes with the fury that pounded in his blood.

Guantra was saying, "Stand away from him, Ilse. A bullet won't stop Kortha, but he won't risk your chances with hot lead."

"What do you want of me?" snarled the giant, mastering his red rage, fingers opening and closing.

"You will be my friend, Kortha. That is all I seek of you. Just your friendship."

Ilse gasped in her throat and whirled around, blue eyes wide. She stood rigid, bent a little forward. She choked, "No, no. Guantra, you wouldn't—not to Kortha. Not that!"

"Not what?" rasped Kortha, scowling in puzzlement.

"The Blue Grotto! It changes men. It makes them different. They aren't the same after they come out of there."

Kortha stared at Ilse, noting the wide ashen eyelashes, the red mouth twisted in pain, the white forehead riven with furrows. Torture! So. It was what he had expected of Guantra: to torture a man until he became a broken thing begging for friendship. Suddenly he looked at Guantra and found the man lost in admiration of Ilse's tanned loveliness.

Kortha leaped like an uncoiling spring. He caught Guantra about the waist and flipped him across a thigh, sending him into a wall. The Premier thudded into the oak and steel, hitting hard. He crouched for long moments on hands and knees, shaking his head. Then he crawled to his feet and looked into his own gun held in Kortha's hand.

"You'll let Ilse and Xax go, Guantra. I remain."

Guantra rubbed his hip, smiling grimly. He nodded.

"Gladly, Kortha. It will be guarantee of our future friendship."

"No," sobbed Ilse, long fingernails biting into Kortha's hairy forearm. "He'll change you. He'll do to you what he did to those—others."

Kortha shook her off. Torture he hated, but he could stand up to it. But if they did anything to Ilse—he wasn't that sure of himself. He had to get rid of her, send her away to Hurlgut. Maybe they could somehow contact Earth or Venus; get help.

Ilse hit his furred chest with tiny fists, whimpering.

"Idiot! Can't you see? Guantra will make you his friend. You'll do what he says. You'll be a figurehead. All the Confederacy will hail the union of Guantra and Kortha. It won't know that only Guantra gives the orders, that you're just a puppet."

Kortha shoved her away.

"Get moving," he snapped. "I'll hold off Guantra until you're safely gone."

Ilse fought and raged, but she was helpless with her bare arm in one of Kortha's hands. She went sideways in front of him as he pushed her. Her red mouth whimpered.

Kortha stood and watched the fleet little scout ship fade into the south. When it had disappeared, he waited for minutes, calculating Ilse's speed against possibility of pursuit. Satisfied, he handed his gun to Guantra.

He growled, "Bring on your torturers, Guantra. Let's get this over with."

But Guantra laughed softly, sheathing the gun.

"Torture? Oh, no. That's a bit—ah—antiquated, isn't it? Besides, I know men, Kortha. Torture would never make me your friend."

"Not torture?"

"Come with me into my stateroom. Oh, be my enemy, if you will. But you'll be needing food, and a bit of Sharasta wine. I have both."

KORTHA realized that if he leaped on Guantra now, he could break his neck or snap his spine. But there would be other Guantras. Better to fight this one, than the others who might arise. He smiled to himself. Apparently those years in the desert had aided him to control his mad temper. In olden days he would have been on Guantra, slaying without thought to a possible future.

He shrugged broad shoulders, aware that his stomach was empty. There was no need to starve to death. He had done a lot without food. He walked after Guantra slowly, thoughtful.

A dull black plasticine screen formed one wall of the hexagonal stateroom. Before it a curved desk glittered dully, littered with charts and papers. Chrystolite chairs and benches gleamed in myriad colors over the thickly woven black rug. Kortha stared around him, nodding. He remembered the ship. It was one he had himself planned.

But the screen was new. He stood in front of it, frowning. Guantra came to his side, gesturing.

"Since you turned hermit, things have happened on Mars, Kortha. This screen is a by-product of researches by my science division. With it, I can detect scenes at certain distances in the open air. Essentially the same as television, we can focus an unlimited field by using cosmic ray amplifiers."

Guantra went to the wall, pressed a button.

"We use radio waves though, throughout the ship, in order to prepare our food."

Kortha looked through the transparent shield in the wall; saw a frozen steak thaw suddenly, cook before his eyes in a matter of seconds.

"High frequency waves," Kortha said. "That's old."

"True, but I've found it saves time to install them in every room. In time of battle, my men need not desert their posts for food. The food is there frozen; needs only six to eight seconds to cook, and be taken out, ready to eat."

A steward came and lifted out the steak, setting it on a table before Kortha. He served chilled Sharasta wine and freshly baked bread. Chilled sugar sauce over bitter fruits brought a hard grin to the giant's mouth. He had not realized before just how hungry he was.

He began to eat.

When he was done, he went and stood at Guantra's side in front of the starboard windows. Outside, sunlight blazed on the quartz-veined cliffs over which the *Varadium* was passing. Hollow depressions glittered as though filled with sparkling gems, while huge stalagmites lifted jagged edges, shot forth scintillating hues that etched color madness on the dun cliffsides.

The sheer cliffs fell away, exposing a massive gap in the mighty mountains. The *Varadium* poked its dull grey nose downward and sank between the ledges.

Staring from the darkened starboard windows, Kortha beheld the iridescent gleam of the mountain-walls turn to yellow and red and green. The colors deepened as the ship lowered on the air currents: grew lavender, then purple. Shadows from the tall cliffsides gave the canyon into which they sank a dark sombreness.

"The Blue Grotto is far below the surface," whispered Guantra. "A young lieutenant discovered and told me about it. I checked his findings; had my engineers pay it a visit. Their work resulted in something that will make your eyes shine."

With her keel scraping dry red sand, the *Varadium* edged along the bed of the canyon. Ahead lay a great black orifice in the side of the cliff: a gigantic cave, vast as Mars' mightiest hangar. Even by straining his keen eyes, Kortha could

make out nothing beyond that ebon darkness.

But when the flier poked its prow into the cave, a battery of tremendous mercury floodlamps leaped to bluish-white life. Blinking in their glare, Kortha looked down at the floor of the cave; found it fitted with great steel cradle, with benches and lathes and tools. The battleflier sank into the cradle with a lurch and a swift righting of its bulk. Springs sighed softly under its weight, cushioning it on a blanket of compressed air.

Guantra led Kortha from the stateroom out along the grey deck, toward the gang-plank, saying, "This place has been useful to me. Extremely so. I've found that it paid to spend the money to equip it."

Kortha looked around him, gauging his chances for fight. Men stepped to benches, swung down ladders, with an air of deft sureness. They paid him the insult of inattention. His hands knotted, then relaxed. Suppose he did fight? It would do him no good. Even Kortha could not overcome the entire crew of a battleflier. Not without a weapon.

Guantra motioned him to a tiny mono-rail car.

"The journey is not far, but we must avoid some—ah—rather terrifying precipices in this. The rail cost fifty lives to install. A misstep above an abyss—"

He shrugged, pressing buttons. The car lurched forward, gathered speed.

"Personally, I think some of them are bottomless. We could take no soundings."

They caught glimpses of black depths to their left as the car slid along on its ribbonlike rail. A string of lights fastened to the cliff cast eerie shadows into the gulf. The car slowed to round a curve.

It halted in a chamber whose walls were sculpted with vividly stained statuary. Their colors were faded now, but here and there were spots of red sunset, or blue ocean, or the white of a ship's sail.

Kortha muffled a curse of surprise in his throat.

"I thought you'd like it," Guantra laughed. "That lieutenant of mine found it. He swears it's a lost museum of some very early Martian race. The ones who lorded it when there were oceans on the planet."

KORTHA did not fight the drag of curiosity. He walked along the wall, intent on the friezes. Here were the tall-prowed water-ships, sails bellying before the wind, cleaving foaming, blue-green ocean. He saw men in mail and helmets battling on green grass. There were boudoir scenes, too, with tall and lovely blonde women reclining on soft cushions, fanned by strangely shaped slaves.

How had this forgotten clue to a past civilization come to be buried under tons of mountains? Perhaps a planetary catastrophe in the past had shifted an entire mountain-range, to bury a city beneath its rock foundations. Then again, the Old Ones might have carved out niches in the stone itself, hollowing chambers the better to preserve traces of their culture.

Kortha hastened his steps, found Guantra waiting for him in a room hung completely with expensive blue-and-gold draperies. Even the ceiling was muffled in bands of rich silk. The floor was a thick fur rug that would have cost a million *kofuls* on the open market. And in the mathematical center of the room was a couch of incredible softness draped with a spotted black-and-silver *ocemar* pelt.

"Lie down and rest, Kortha. I shall leave you to your thoughts."

Kortha came up swiftly in front of Guantra and grasped him by his arms above the elbows. He swung the Premier off his feet, held him inches above the ground, glaring at him.

"I could kill you, Guantra. I could snap your spine as a king gorilla could a twig. You would die."

Guantra paled and licked him lips. Then he managed to laugh.

"No need for that. All I ask is that you spend the night here. In this room, sleeping on that couch. After that, you are free to leave."

Kortha dropped the man in his bewilderment, saying, "Is that all? Is the place haunted? Ought I start at ghosts? Or do you gas the lungs out of me?"

"Neither. Just stay here. No harm will come to you."

Kortha grinned and surveyed the drapes. He ran fingers through his thick yellow hair. He chuckled, "I'll stay. In the morning, I'll leave."

He watched Guantra close the door be-

hind him. He heard the bolt snick into place. He went and sank on the couch. It was soft, enticing. Putting up his tanned legs, he crossed them at the ankles.

Kortha tried to think, to reason out the danger of the room. But even his giant body knew the lassitude of fatigue. He closed his eyes, trying to sort out facts and interpret them; shaking his head a little, muttering at his tiredness. Guantra had the whiphand, with Hurlgut a cripple and Ilse and Xax no help at all. And he, Kortha! Of what use was he, sleeping like a perfumed harlot on this couch? If he could raise an army, now—

His eyelids blinked against the tiredness beating up from deep within him. Wave upon wave of languor swept to his brain, wrapping it in soft and gentle folds. He closed his eyes. Just for a minute, just until he was refreshed—

Kortha slept. His big body lay utterly relaxed, every muscle inert, like a lazing panther. The room was drugging in its silence. The thick draping seemed to enfold, to cradle.

"Kortha!"

It was a voice like a wind whispering in pines. It souged across the room, making the man turn lazily in his slumber, uneasy.

"Kortha, speak to me. Tell me of yourself. Who are you, Kortha?"

The man slept, but his lips spoke, sighing, "I am Kortha the strong. The hard, the cruel."

"Ahhh, no. You must forget that, Kortha. True, you are heavily muscled, but so are many men."

"I crippled Hurlgut my best friend, in a fit of rage. I am not to be trusted. My temper is the red heart of the living volcano. It can spew destruction."

"Forget that you are Kortha. He never existed. You are not that Kortha, but another. Tell me about this best friend, Kortha. Tell me. Tell me."

Kortha whispered the tale, shuddering even as he slept.

The voice spoke to him, and its softness was the purl of a wave lapping at the shore.

"You are wrong. It happened thus—"

Kortha half-rose, listening, though his eyes were closed and his breath came evenly.

"Repeat after me—Repeat —

"I saw Hurlgut in his tower room. We did not quarrel over politics with Earth. Hurlgut did not call me names, denounce me as 'war-mad' and 'enhanced with my own powers.' The sun formed a pool at his feet, true. But it was the guard—not I!—who leaped, struck swift and sure. I slew the guard, but the damage had been done.

"Hurlgut slandered me. He said I did it. I did not. Hurlgut was jealous of my strength on Mars. He thinks I want power on Mars. I do not. Guantra is the one true leader of Mars. It was the guard who crippled Hurlgut, the guard who did it.

"The guard did it.

"The guard."

KORTHAY lay back in his cushions, muttering. The room grew silent once again. Then—

"Kortha!"

"I hear."

"Tell me of your life, Kortha. All of it. All the deeds of childhood, all the incidents. Tell me of your youth and manhood. Speak to me and tell me."

Kortha spoke for hours while the voice listened. When he had done, the voice whispered once again, and its sound flitted through the arras-hung room, susurrating eerily.

"Your childhood pattern fits into section j-2364-k7. Therefor the treatment will be relayed over into that pattern, with emphasis on friendship."

If Kortha had been awake, he would have heard the click of tiny wheels, the metallic rustle of machinery, the flick of a needle of compressed air on a metal filament. The drapes helped deaden those sounds, and Kortha slept on.

"Kortha, listen. When you came from Fraysia to be a student at the Academy. You remember that first day when you met—Guantra?"

No, it had not been Guantra. It had been Hurlgut whom he'd met, there on the white walk. Or had it really been Guantra? Was his memory that bad? Guantra standing before him, smiling at him, putting a friendly hand on his big arm and saying, "You look like officer material. Come with me. I'd like to see

you fence. You have the build for it."

And it was Guantra, not Hurlgut, who stood with him, awed at the magic in the lightning parry and thrust of the sword in his hand. He had defeated Mayram the champion that afternoon as Guantra looked on. Beaten him with a glittering sword in his hand and a fire in his green eyes and dancing joy in his heart.

He told Hurlgut—no, Guantra! about it afterward in his rooms; how his father had had him taught by Eric MacCormac the American, who was tri-planet champion in all three weapons: foil, sabre and epee. And Guantra listened, pleased.

The voice went on, whispering softly, speaking to him, lifting from his memory the threads of recollection, removing the very fibre of his character, as a mason lifts old tile to lay the new. Bit after glittering bit of fact was slipped in to take the place of memory. Fact that was so plausible it became the truth.

It was Guantra who had given him his first engineering chance, in letting him charge and electrolyze the bastion of cliff-works surrounding radio city Ruuzol. With cables and generators, he had made those mountain ridges of solid metals the sounding board for a spacevox system that was first in the solar system. Kortha had done a great job on that, thanks to Guantra. Later, there were other triumphs. Then—

"You fled to the desert to escape Ilse. She sought after you, trying to enmesh you in her charms. All the time you knew she was the chosen of Guantra. Guantra loves her.

"Guantra is your friend. You would not steal the woman of a friend.

"You gave her up. You ran from her, hoping to lose yourself in the desert, thinking Ilse would forget . . ."

Kortha stirred restlessly, but relaxed. He listened, absorbed.

"Ilse found you in your smithy. You wanted to find Guantra to get his advice, so you went to Yassa. Hurlgut sent men to kill you. You slew them instead, and fled again. Ilse came to tempt you, but you were saved by Guantra. He sent Ilse away, and brought you to safety."

Kortha sighed softly.

"Guantra is your friend, Kortha. The two of you might easily rule Mars. Two friends to lead Mars to its rightful place

among the planets. You and Guantra. True friends . . ."

Kortha whispered, "Guantra is my friend. Ilse is a wanton seeking my love. Hurlgut hates me, for Hurlgut is jealous."

"That is correct. Now repeat all that I have told you, after me."

Their voices susurrated in the draped room. Their voices fled from wall to wall, and sank into oblivion. The candle that marked the hours and the days burned lower. Only the voices lived, and the teeming brain of Kortha that was taught by an unsleeping, patient, mechanical teacher.

IV

IT was still in the room when Kortha woke. He stared around, wondering. Of course! Guantra had brought him here to seek repose. He chuckled. You'd think he was a baby, the way Guantra humored him. Always giving him the best. Well, that was the way of a friend for you. He clambered to his feet and rubbed his arms with his big, brown hands. The candle was spluttering in its golden socket. Kortha frowned. That candle had burned for three days!

He must have been tired. He recalled it had been a new candle when Guantra had shown him into this room. There had been some question of his sleeping and leaving? No, that could not be. He would have no reason to leave Guantra, now. But he must have been very tired. Three days asleep!

Kortha searched among the drapes, seeking an exit. He found a tiny, moon-shaped door opposite his couch. It opened creakily under his palm, and he stepped into a tunnel. Lights switched on as though by the heat of his body. He walked slowly, frowning. He did not remember this passageway at all.

Water lapped at rock ahead of him. He was puzzled. There were no large bodies of water on Mars, unless there were subterranean seas that topographers knew nothing of!

He hurried forward; came to an abrupt stop, staring.

An underground cave widened before his eyes. Throughout its shadowy length, the haze that filled it was tinted blue, and

the waters of this undersurface ocean blazed like blue fire in its reflection. Azure stalagmites thrust up gnarled arms and heads in eerie grotesqueries. Ahead of him for mile after mile stretched that limpid sea. Here and there a rock rose, wet and clammy, above its blue surface. Shadows gloomed in the distance.

Kortha fell to his knees at the edge of the stone floor, fascinated by the water. He dipped a hand into it: felt it cool and soothing on his flesh.

Startled, he stared into its depths. There was something moving down among those bluish fires, something white and strange. Something was flashing through the water, swooping up toward his kneeling figure. He saw white flesh and tossing hair. He saw flanks and breasts, and churning legs.

Her white hands and wrists broke water first. Then Ilse lifted her wet, platinum hair and shook it, spraying drops. She put hands to his and let him lift her to the ledge.

"Xax showed me a way through the mountains that the tumblers used to know, long ago. I hurried here, Kortha, to get you away before—"

His green eyes were sullen, looking down at her. Ilse stopped her flow of words, listening to him say, "Guantra will be glad to see you."

Kortha thought: this is the wanton in all her seductive flesh. See how the silver hair brushes her smooth shoulders, look how her legs are straight and shapely; that red mouth is ripe for kisses, and those eyes of blue are looking at me with love and affection.

He turned his face away from her, staring down the long emptiness of the sea cavern.

Ilse put her hand to her open mouth, staring in horror at the big man's averted face. Her throat quivered uncontrollably, but she choked back the cry rising to utterance. Her wet hands found his and squeezed desperately.

"Oh, my darling! He's done it to you as I knew he would unless I hurried. I thought I would be in time, but it was a hard trail up the mountains. We had to go on foot. I'm too late, too late!"

Kortha shoved her away from him roughly, snarling, "Save your blandishments, Ilse. You won't find them helpful

with me. You belong to Guantra. I do not find you attractive."

He lied, and he knew he lied. This white witch of a woman with the red mouth and the blue eyes and the platinum hair was a draught to make a statue hunger. Yet she was for Guantra. Well, Guantra deserved the best. And yet . . .

"You must come with me, Kortha. Hurlgut—"

"Hurlgut is jealous of me. He slanders me. I have never given him cause to do that. He claims I broke his back, but he does not tell the truth. It was the guard, not I. The guard did it."

Eyes closed, Ilse bowed her head. Her heart was a thing of lead in her bosom. This mewling, complaining thing was Kortha! Kortha, who would spit in the face of a living Zut if he angered him. She bit her lip hard, and tasted the drops of blood that welled to the surface.

She looked up. She said slowly. "We are going to surprise Guantra. You see, if Guantra could learn that with you all Mars would be his friend, he would like it. If he heard from your lips that you would back him as Premier against Earth and Venus—"

"Is there any doubt of that?"

Ilse knew she had to feel her way here. Not knowing what Kortha had been told, been made to believe in as truth, she must be wary; step lightly in her speech, explore his knowledge with words.

"Yes. When you ran away to the desert," she looked at him curiously and breathed again when she saw him nod curtly, "there were some who said that you and Guantra had a falling out. That you ran from him as a sort of protest."

Kortha laughed, looking at the girl, "That is ridiculous. *You* know why I ran away. Because you wantoned after me. I ran away from you, Ilse."

SO that was the reason Kortha had been given! Ilse held her eyes shut tightly. Her left hand bit its long fingernails into the naked skin of her flank. Pain! Pain would help to cancel the sodden ache in her heart.

"Yes," she whispered. "I know. But Mars doesn't know that, and Mars has to be told. If Mars could hear the truth from your lips—"

"Come with me to radio-city Ruuzol, Kortha. Broadcast to Mars. Be the first to let the planet know you and Guantra are friends. You be the first; you, his friend."

Kortha nodded slowly. He felt Ilse's hands squeezing his.

"It must be a secret, though. We can't let Guantra know, or the surprise would be spoiled. You have to come with me."

She saw his eyes light after a moment, and she knew she had won; that he would go with her away from the Blue Grotto and its magical machine that could steal men's minds from them and give them something different in exchange. She turned, dove for the water.

Kortha was beside her, sinking into the blue fire of water, dropping down and down past coral growths and bannery weeds that slithered in ripples as the currents wafted them to and fro. Following her threshing legs, clinging to coral branches as did she, pulling himself along, Kortha went under a ledge and rose swiftly in a tiny cave.

Ilse said as she treaded water, "My 'copter is outside. It will take us to Ruuzol."

Ruuzol was the communication center of all Mars. A vast glassine paraboloid was built on a flat mesa against a cliffside. It housed vast turbines and generators, and the central controls, as well as laboratories and rows of dwellings, where the men lived. A fountain-dotted park gave the small city an air of leisure.

Their 'copter swooped in over the flat plains surrounding the mesa, casting its shadow from the high cliffs all around the plain out across the flatlands, up onto the mesa sides.

Flanking the great transparent paraboloid were the twin tubes, taller than the dome itself, thrusting their glass-and-steel structures two thousand feet into the air. At their tops, three metal planes were inserted into their trunks; planes that were the secret of the Martian radio beams, planes that sent the spacevox rocketing to Earth and Venus, and the direct broadcasts out over the sandy wastes of Mars.

Ilse flashed her 'copter past a tube and spiralled gracefully to one of the white landing strips beyond the dome.

They walked toward the paraboloid. Ilse showed credentials to the guards at

the entrance; then they were through and into the cool, pleasant air of the paraboloid, moving on one of the glass walks.

The harsh tones of the communicator sprang to speech around them: "The princess Ilse. The princess Ilse. The Emperor desires speech. The Emperor desires speech."

Kortha muttered something under his breath, but Ilse pretended not to hear him, saying, "It will only be a moment."

They found Hurlgut propped in cushions, flushed and worried. His eyes opened wide at sight of Kortha, and the worry fled.

"Kortha!" he cried, putting out both hands, lifting a little where he sat. "So Ilse did find you!"

Ilse stepped to one side, offering prayers to Zut.

Kortha looked at Hurlgut, saw him lying white and broken among the striped pillows. He wanted to rage at this liar, at this mongerer of scandal. He learned with a little surprise that he could not. If Hurlgut wanted to blame him, let him. Kortha had never fought cripples before. He would not begin now.

"—so good to see you, man. Give me your hand. Give it to me, man! There Let me look at you. The same, the same. Big. Strong. Unbending. Mars' only hope. I need you, Kortha. Guantra has but now concluded speaking on the radio beams. He knows you fled from him, came here. He traced you in that cosmiclarifier of his."

Kortha remembered the black screen in the flagship stateroom.

"Guantra will be surprised when I broadcast. Eh, Ilse?"

"Yes," whispered Ilse.

Hurlgut looked surprised, exclaiming, "Why, Guantra will not let you broadcast, Kortha. He will destroy Ruuzol first. He threatened to, in fact."

"But he can't. Not until I've made my speech to Mars, told them how he and I will unite—"

Ilse touched her temple and her heart, looking at Hurlgut, nodding toward Kortha. Then Kortha was whirling on her, saying, "Get me to a magnifone. I'll speak to Guantra's ship, tell him what I intend to do. The surprise is off, Ilse—but the speech can still be made!"

Suddenly Kortha swayed a little. He

put a hand to his forehead. This was all wrong! Ilse and Hurlgut were his friends! No, no. It was Guantra who was his friend. Guantra has always befriended me. He gave me my start. It is with him that my fortune lies. I must tell him so.

But Ilse?

Look at her, man. Look at her blue eyes again. They are so serious, so sad, as she watches you. There is naught of the wanton there. A wanton would laugh and giggle and be gay. Instead there is yearning and sorrow and love in her eyes as she regards you.

And Hurlgut?

He lay helpless in his cushions, unable to move below the waist. He looked at Kortha, too, and there was pity in his eyes. Kortha did not fight with men who could not walk to meet him. Did Guantra? He had the sharp, hard conviction that he must know the answer to that. It might help him decide incongruities.

KORTHASighed. He wished that he could solve this enigma that turned him inside-out in puzzlement. He found himself liking Ilse and Hurlgut, even knowing what he did to them; and learned he was close to hating Guantra. Guantra had the power. Hurlgut was a cripple, and Ilse a girl. Could Guantra fight them with the armies and the fleets of Mars, and still hold his head high? Could—he?

Ilse stood at the open door, watching him. Kortha realized she had been standing there for minutes, as he had thought. He scowled, and muttered, "Get me to the magnifone. I'll speak to Guantra."

Following Ilse to the lift, Kortha brooded at her.

Zut, but she was lovely! If only she were not the wanton he knew her for. And yet—always that . . . and yet! And yet, there was nothing of the wanton about her. The perfume from her fur bolero floated around them in the lift. It reminded him of things, that perfume: of memories that were stored so deeply in his subconscious that he had completely forgotten them. Kisses over the canals in a drifting 'coptondola. An Academy dance with Ilse wearing a black, filmy thing that made the blue of her eyes and the silver hair weirdly beautiful. And those nights when they had eaten cold fruit and drank

of iced *bessa*-mead in the palace gardens near colored-water fountains, before he had—before the guard had crippled Hurlgut.

He could not square remembered happiness with other memories. There was a leak somewhere. He had to learn more—"Ilse," he said.

The lift was opening and the girl was going down the corridor. Kortha shrugged and followed her. He was probably mistaken. Those memories were the overflow from a forgotten dream.

In the big control room he stood watching Ilse punch buttons. A beam-man stared at him from a corner panel-slot. Let him look. The name of Kortha was legendary on Mars. He heard Ilse saying, "Guantra. Guantra!" into a fine-meshed magnifone.

The screen above the panelling came alive with the Premier's sneering, point-bearded face; and his voice was harsh, cold.

"So. You got to Kortha before me, Ilse. It is too bad. I would like to know whether—let me speak to him."

Kortha stared up at Guantra's scowling face. The man was worried. The way his tongue licked unceasingly at his thin lips, the hands tugging at the crested metal buckle of his belt, the creases around his narrowed eyes: they were signal flares pointing his anxiety. There was something bothering Guantra, too, even as it bothered him.

What was it? Kortha had to know. Kortha sucked in his breath, realizing that the duel was between him and Guantra. Each had knowledge, and they had to trade to know where they stood. Guantra wanted to be sure of what? Of his friendship? But—why? He himself sought to test that elusive memory of his. It told him Ilse was wanton and Hurlgut a danger; but his senses belittled that memory.

Perhaps Guantra could be persuaded to give him the knowledge he sought. He put Ilse aside, placed mouth to the magnifone.

"Kortha on the beam, Guantra. Tell me something. Am I your friend, Guantra?"

The man with the jutting beard licked at his lips for a split second, but it was long enough. Kortha knew now that Guantra *did not know!* That meant that his senses might be right, after all; that

his memory was wrong. And if his memory were wrong, then Ilse and Hurlgut were not what he thought them.

He listened to Guantra bluster, calling out to him to recall and act on their old friendship. Smiling grimly, he leaned closer to the image on the screen. Test him, Kortha!

"Let me broadcast to all Mars, Guantra. Let me tell Mars that we are friends."

"No," said Guantra swiftly. "That would not be politic right now. Better that you and I should meet, Kortha. Come aboard my flagship."

Afraid of what he might say, the Premier would not let him speak to Mars. Kortha wanted to know the reason why Guantra doubted their friendship. Looking at the cold austerity, the pride and ambition of the man as marked in the lines of his face and the manner of his bearing, Kortha rather thought the reason was not Ilse. A man like Guantra would not bother so about a woman.

"I will broadcast, Guantra," Kortha said slowly.

"No. I will have to stop that, my friend. I cannot allow it, until I have seen and spoken with you, face to face. I am coming in for you now."

They saw the Premier reach out and break connection.

Kortha looked at the blank screen; he whirled on Ilse, and his big hands went out to catch her by the shoulders and bring her up close to him.

He said savagely, "Tell me! Tell me what I don't know. Why has Guantra turned against me? Why does he doubt my friendship? It can't be over you. He is not the man to endanger his power for a woman. What is his reason?"

Her blue eyes were unafraid. She said, "Guantra was never your friend. I dared not tell you before, but I can now because you have doubts of what your memory tells you. You saw how indecisive he was. He does not know whether his psycho-analyser in the Blue Grotto had time to change you. I got you out of there before he knew, before he had seen and spoken with you."

The giant released her; ran fingers that shook a little through the thick mop of his yellow hair, frowning.

"I don't understand. What psycho-

analyser? What Blue Grotto? Wait—I remember the grotto, with the blue sea. But the rest is strange to me.”

“And the room fitted with drapes? The couch with the ocomar pelts?”

“I slept there.”

SHE told him then, hurriedly: of how the psychoanalyser was one of the machines Guantra had taken from the tower of Zut in Yassa and set it up in his hidden lair, and how he used it to turn key men into his friends by giving them new memories that were so closely linked with their old that rarely were they so much as hesitant about them. Only Kortha doubted, and that was because Ilse had come to him before Guantra. She picked up the thread of his life at the smithy in the desert and went on with it.

Once he interrupted, with, “But it was Hurlgut who sent men to kill me in the tower of Zut?”

Ilse scorned that, “Hurlgut send men? Who on Mars would serve a cripple when Guantra rules the fleets? Would Hurlgut hide in Ruuzol if he could put his banners in the air?”

When she was through, he whispered through stiff lips, “This psychoanalyzer. It changes men, then?”

“Guantra changed several men in council positions with it. He needed their support. He got it. It can make a brave man a craven; or a coward, a hero. It was built by the Ancients, who understood the mind as well as other sciences. They realized that the memory cells that govern many of our habits and thoughts could be altered by hypnotically suggested alterations. They built a machine that would do that. We learned of it, but could never do anything about it. People would have laughed, said we fought Guantra with myths.”

Kortha growled, “I’m still not sure. But I’ll fight Guantra until I can make up my own mind!”

Ilse’s lips twitched wryly. Her shoulders sagged a little as she leaned against a table, looking up at him.

“Fight Guantra? Here in Ruuzol? You are mad, Kortha. There isn’t a single gun in Ruuzol. No weaponry of any sort. It can’t defend itself; was never intended to. This mesa is one mass of radio lab-

oratories and generators, tubes and condensers.”

No weapon. No gun. Just a lot of magnifones, and words never killed anybody yet. Kortha bared his teeth in a silent snarl.

“I’ll broadcast before he can stop me. Let him fire on us, then!”

“No. He won’t fire, not yet. Have you forgotten the lightning guns? They will cripple all our power. We couldn’t broadcast past those metal mountains without power.”

The lightning guns. Kortha came up short on that. He cursed softly, brows furrowed. Aye, he remembered the lightning guns, psychoanalyser or no psychoanalyser! With them it would be as Ilse said. Guantra would break their power; land men, and take over the city.

“The laboratories,” he grated. “Get me to your laboratories. There may still be a way to stop those lightning guns.”

Ilse looked at him; gasped suddenly at the old, flaring lights in his green eyes. She laughed softly, gladly, and turned and ran ahead of him.

The ceiling lights were blue and bright, flooding the long laboratory chambers where chrome and steelite glistened and glass fittings refracted rainbows of color against the scalloped walls. Black, short shadows flickered where men stood at their places, staring.

“This is Kortha,” said Ilse, head flung back, eyes blazing with azure fire. “If anyone can stop Guantra, he can.”

A sullen giant hulked forward from a bench, arms dangling, scowling, “Surrender to him, I say. We have no chance against the fleet. The rest of you—Guantra has no fight with us. Why do we do what one girl and one man tell us?”

Kortha uncoiled, springing. His fist shot out like a flatheaded piston, cracking the sullen man on the jaw. The *splat* of the blow was loud in the silence broken only by the brrring of the ceiling reflectors lazily rotating.

Over the body of the unconscious man, Kortha snarled, “Anyone else advise surrender?”

They looked at him, and dropped their eyes. Heads shook.

“Good. Get me blueprint papers, and diagrams of your ultraviolet radiator bat-

teries. I want relayed batteries set up, and I must know how many I have to work with."

Ilse saw hope struggling for place in the eyes of the men as they looked at Kortha. She laughed gaily, putting a hand on the big man's arm, saying loudly, "This is Kortha. I told you. He can pull miracles out of a hole in space!"

Feet pounded on the linoleotile flooring. Drawers opened, banged shut; glass cabinets clinked faintly, and papers rustled. Ilse stood against Kortha, touching him, smiling wryly.

"Only your name could make them hop like that against the power that is Guantra. They're all loyal, but practical. They know to an iotagram what chance Hurlgut has!"

"He has a good chance," growled Kortha. He did not look at her. He did not dare: she was too lovely, with her blue eyes and platinum hair, and the kissable mouth. He had not decided yet, and wanted his reason to figure this out, not his emotions.

THE men came and spread their diagrams and date-sheets and charts before him. His keen eyes flicked back and forth, ran down columns, studied hook-ups and relays.

"These batteries," he said suddenly, pointing. "Shift them there. These others, over to this spot. Move those back, arrange them in arcs. They must be distributed evenly around Ruuzol. Here, I'll work it out for you."

He sketched quickly. With T-square and callipers he strove for arrangements on the blueprints, and succeeded. The engineers and physicists looked at his work and up at him, puzzled. Kortha snorted.

"The batteries will furnish ultraviolet rays, won't they? In the patterns we set by grouping them like this?"

A young engineer nodded dubiously.

"Yes, but—"

Kortha rasped an oath, stood up.

"Do what I say. I'll explain to you later, when I bring the final distribution sheets to you. You'll have to follow my instructions to the letter. The radiator batteries must be set so, to make a pattern thus. Any deviation will result in disaster. Hurry!"

Up in the control tower the red light was flickering. Kortha allowed himself a smile. The ultraviolet batteries were in place, needing only a fingerpress on a button beneath his hand to fire them. He looked up at the flagship maneuvering in circles above the dome. They were ready up there now.

Kortha depressed the button, and laughed.

An instant later, white fires burst from the guns of the flagship, flaring zigzags that darted toward the upright tubes on either side of the paraboloid. The metal planes would draw that lightning; it would sear them, crack them, erupt into thunderous cascades of escaping power—

The lightnings never touched their target.

As though an invisible mantle of veins were spread above the radio city, the lightnings sprayed away, following the veins, grounding in showers of tiny sparks on the plains below. They made eerie traceries of light over the city as the guns spouted lightning again and again. The glassite dome was bathed in a white, luminous glow from the nets of meshed zigzags in the air above it, that ran in streaks of jagged white fire all around the city.

And always the lightnings grounded on the plains. The city lay untouched.

Kortha chuckled. He laughed aloud. He bellowed his mirth, slapping a thigh with his big hand, yelping, "A million *kofuls* to see Guantra's face I'd give right now. He must be swallowing his tongue in rage. I'll bet he's hopping. He doesn't know what I've done. He thinks I'm a magician!"

"A lot of other people think the same thing," said Ilse dryly. "Including myself. And those engineers! They'll be sweating their curiosity, now that they see how your diagrams are working. They pestered me with questions, but I couldn't answer them."

"Summon them," grinned Kortha.

When they stood silent before him, he laughed them into smiles. One of them echoed his laughter, and then they all were bellowing.

Kortha said when they were wiping tears of delight from their eyes, "Lightning follows a pattern through the air, doesn't it? It follows beams of ionized air that are everywhere. Those ionized air beams

flow down to Ruuzol, too. The only way to stop lightning from hitting us was to form other ionized air currents that lead it away from us."

A man with beaming face shouted, "Ultraviolet rays ionize air!"

"All we needed to do was set the batteries of radiators up in such a sequence that the lightning followed the ionized air beams they created. We made our own air currents and naturally the lightning had to follow them. It couldn't get past them!"

The cheer that rang in the room dropped to a hush as the screen glowed with Guantra's snarling face.

"You've won this round, Kortha. But I'm bringing the fleet here. We'll see if you can work magic against belching guns. However, your evil genius can plan, it can't work miracles all the time. You—you imp of Zut's black brother, you!"

Kortha laughed in his face.

The screen went dead.

The engineers went dead, too, until Kortha sent his booming laugh out at them, shouting, "Let him bring his fleet. It's the showdown fight we want. Let him come to us. I've an ace up my sleeve that I haven't played yet. Why, if Earth and Venus were to send their space fleets here with Guantra, we'd still win!"

The men did not believe that, but they shuffled their feet, uncertain. It is hard to doubt a man who has just performed a miracle that your own eyes have seen. There is always that lurking thought that he might pull another, too.

Ilse said, "We have no guns on Ruuzol."

"This whole city is a gun," said Kortha, and laughed again.

His mirth was infectious. The engineers grinned and looked at each other and laughed a little. They hadn't the slightest notion of why Kortha laughed, or why they grinned, but no one could resist such a magnificent confidence in a city that was without a weapon, and yet a gun all by itself.

KORTHA spread his hands, asking, "This is a radio city, isn't it? It has every science necessary to perfect radio technique, hasn't it? Get me Xax! He and I have work to do."

The tumble shrilled a greeting, passing

the engineers leaving the room. He rolled across to the bronzed giant, clicking his needles, eager, curious. Kortha grinned at him, dropped to a knee to speak to him.

"You are the only one in all Ruuzol who can do this job, Xax. Any other who left here would be shot by the guards Guantra will post before he goes. It's up to you. Will you help me fight Guantra? I won't blame you if you refuse."

"Tell me what you want me to do," said Xax simply. "You waste time, talking nonsense."

Kortha took Xax to the tower window and showed him the red cliffs that rose all around Ruuzol, towering toward the sky.

"Years ago, when I first came to Ruuzol from the Academy, I sank cables into the metal of those cliffs. I laid them underground to the mesa, here. I connected their vast bulk with the generators and tube relays of the city. I have to know if those cables are still attached. You can tell me. I shall let you know what tests to apply in the tiny caves where the cable-controls are sunk. You can perform those tests with you feelers, Xax."

"What tests, Kortha?"

The giant told him, repeating himself for emphasis. But the tumble understood, and said so. Kortha watched him click-roll out of the tower, and rose, sighing.

To Ilse he said, "Let's go back to the laboratories again. I'll need to make more diagrams. Get the engineers to meet me. They'll have to change cable terminals and install them on a different hookup."

Down in the laboratories, Ilse sat for hours, watching Kortha as he labored over charts and graphs, often without moving more than hands and eyes for an hour at a stretch. When he was done, he stood up and stretched like a waking tiger. He grinned, and handed the graphs to her.

Her eyes widened, looking down.

"Why, this is just—" she looked up, startled, beginning to smile.

"Something any modern housewife knows," he agreed. He laughed and said, "Guantra will call it more magic."

"It is magic," Ilse said softly. "It is the magic of your brain that can think of something like this at a time like this."

"Bah," chuckled Kortha, but he tingled meeting her eyes.

Hours later, the western sky grew dark with warships.

Kortha and Ilse stood once more in the tower over the paraboloid city, their arms touching. Before Kortha lay a white metal box with a red enamel switch disappearing inside it.

They watched the mighty battlefliers loom sullen and black above the coppery cliffs, pointing their blunt noses downward, dropping one after the other from the blue sky into the reddish plains below. They came swiftly, in perfect echelon, masts flying the black panther banner of Guantra. Their gunports lay open, the lean metal nozzles of their guns glistening in the sunlight.

"Zut," whispered Ilse. "Guantra compliments you. He has stripped all of Mars to capture you."

Xax said dryly, "The legend of Kortha is more than a legend, it seems."

"To destroy that fleet would cripple Mars for a decade," Kortha whispered. "I couldn't do it, unless I was sure that the stakes we fight for are worth it."

"We fight for Mars," said Ilse.

"Yes. Yes, I begin to believe that. When one man is so powerful he can do with a warfleet what he will, to achieve his own personal ambitions—"

They stood silent, watching the fleets come black across the skies.

"I can give them a taste of what they're going to get unless Guantra surrenders," said Kortha. "I needn't kill them all. Just cause a few—ah—explosions."

"Guantra will never surrender."

"His men will make him. They will realize I hold the trump cards in this little game."

The fleets came in unhurriedly, majestically.

Aboard each flier was purposeful order as men ran across clean decks, stood warily at battle-stations, swarmed into the upper shrouds with small-arms. A few broadsides from those cannon would reduce Ruuzol to smoldering ruins.

"Now?" whispered Ilse through wet lips.

"No. Not yet. I want them all within range."

Minutes eked along, slowly. Now the ships were prow to bow, circling the mesa. Ilse shuddered, looking at the empty holes in the gun-muzzles. She licked her lips

and found her tongue dry as the dust of the Yassan Desert.

"Now!" said Kortha, and his hand flashed out, and the red lever swung over, hard.

It stayed over for short seconds.

SHIPS and guns exploded in the air as they wheeled around Ruuzol. Vast red flares sprang to life amid deafening detonations. Metal buckled and split. Powder charges sloughed upward and outward, carrying men and equipment with it in a crimson spray of destruction. The exploding magazines burst open the fliers, twisting and rending the metal hulls, ripping jagged holes, lifting off entire deck sections, sending men and railings into the air.

Crimson ruin rained on the red plains. Ilse whimpered, watching.

Kortha swung the red lever back, panting harshly.

"There goes the Mars you built," sobbed Ilse.

"We can rebuild ships," said Kortha. "Some men will die, but not all, as would happen had I let the switch stay on a while longer. Those men will build and man new ships, for a new Mars. Had I left the switch on too long, not a living thing would exist between Ruuzol and those cliffs."

Kortha chuckled a little, seeing distress and surrender flags break from the masts of every ship in the vast flotilla. Even Guantra's flagship fluttered the white pennon.

"Send Guantra to us in unconditional surrender. Radio every flier that unless Guantra yields, we'll kill them all. We won't have to make good that pledge, though. The men and the commanders out there are limp with amazement, and fright of the unknown. They don't know what weapon we use. They thought themselves so secure from reprisal, you see. The unexpected will make cravens of them, for the moment. Oh, yes. And tell Guantra and his men to come unarmed. We in Ruuzol don't own a single gun."

Minutes later a tiny flier broke from the flagship and dropped toward the landing strips on the mesa. Kortha still had his hand on the red lever, watching every vessel that hung motionless in the air

above the plain. But there was no fight in any of them. Kortha was right. The sudden destruction that had leaped from the very silence around them had sapped aggressiveness.

Kortha had made his name spell magic once again.

Guantra was a beaten man. As he stepped into the glassite tower, his cheeks were sunken, his eyes hollow above blackish rings. He stumbled over the threshold, and kept licking his lips helplessly. When Ilse saw his eyes, she knew suddenly what an enemy Kortha was. From the eyes of Guantra came the look that a slave might cast to an adored idol that came to life, and thundered curses on him. Guantra looked at Kortha as though he expected fire to shoot from his mouth and devour him.

Kortha grinned, "I told you you would never beat me, Guntra. Are we friends again?"

"Friends?" screamed the Premier, a white froth at the corners of his thin mouth. "You and I were never friends. We were always enemies. We were destined by fate to fight. And you—by some unknown magic you always win. You turn defeat to overwhelming victory. Always. It isn't fair to other men. Are you Zut himself? But now—now that you have won—taste what it feels like to—lose!"

From the depths of his despair, Guantra acted. His hand went to his tunic, lifted out with a heatgun in it.

His officers cried out at his treachery.

Kortha came in low, ducking under the sizzling blast that burnt black splotches on the white fur of his jacket. His left fist arced up, sending the heatgun from the numbed hand of the Premier. His right hand came across in a blur of motion: struck like a piston against Guantra's jaw. His fist whipped the man's head up and back, making the hair fly like seafoam striking a rock.

The crack of the neck breaking under the titanic power of the blow was etched against a frightened stillness.

Ilse and the officers stared at the crumpling form of the Premier whose knees sagged, lowering his body gently to the floor. His head hung at a sick angle from his limp neck.

Across the fallen body, Kortha looked at the white-faced officers. One of them extended his hands, palms down, saying, "Search us, Kortha. We came in peace."

Kortha grinned again and waved a brown hand.

"My fight was with Guantra. I thought he was my friend. Perhaps one of you can tell me about—the Blue Grotto?"

They were all of them men from Guantra's flagship. Eagerly their mouths spilled words, reciting the tale Ilse already had told him. Kortha stared down at Guantra, grim-faced, silent. He sighed once when they were finished, and looked at Ilse.

"And I never knew," he said to her softly.

He spoke to the officers, "It was true, then. Guantra is and has been my enemy, and the enemy of all Mars. I am glad to know that." And he rubbed his right fist thoughtfully.

"Can you find it in your heart to forgive a fool?" he asked of Ilse.

There were tears in her eyes. She stumbled forward, was caught and crushed tight against him. His lips drank from hers, thirstily.

The officers moved their feet, embarrassed. Kortha looked at them across Ilse's platinum hair, and laughed.

"You'll forgive me a moment's humanity," he said. "There are no terms to give you. I am returning to the council. From here on out, Mars will take her place beside Earth and Venus. *This* time they won't back out of their agreements."

THE officers grinned at each other, wanting to yell their delight. They had known Kortha in the old days. One of them stepped ahead, hesitantly.

"We—ah—we are very curious, Kortha. The way in which you beat us, that is. There were no guns in Ruuzol. There was no way to beat us. You could not defeat us. Yet you did. When the explosions began, Guantra went a little mad. He called you 'brood of Zut.' Frankly, a lot of us thought there was something supernatural about it, too. As a matter of fact I still do, and so do the rest of us."

Kortha grinned at them, saying, "As a matter of fact, you have the same weapon I used aboard the flagship. Aboard every

ship in the fleet, for that matter."

They looked at him, and their eyes bulged.

Kortha walked hand in hand with Ilse toward a cabinet inset in the tower wall. The officers came to stand around him in a semi-circle, watching him bring forth a small box fitted with a row of electronic tubes and cables fitted to two plates.

"It looks like a radio set," said one of the officers.

"It is," replied Kortha. "Except that it sends a stream of high frequency waves back and forth between those plates, instead of a voice into space. It internally induces heat into an object placed between the plates."

Kortha took an iron bar and set it on the lower plate. He turned switches, looking down. Almost instantly the bar glowed faintly red, then waxed brighter and brighter. From brilliant crimson, it turned white with heat. Kortha flipped the current off.

"The electronic tubes shoot a flow of high frequency waves between the plates."

"But that's ancient," protested an officer. "We cook that way on board—"

He broke off, eyes widening. He managed a sickly grin.

Kortha said, "I know it. I ate a meal cooked that way on the flagship. Housewives cook this way all over the three planets. You see, I am no magician after all. That's what I did to your ships. My two plates were charged cliffides and the mesa. From the batteries of giant electronic tubes in Ruuzol, I spread those waves back and forth, caught your ships in their flow as food is caught, or as the iron bar. The high heat that was produced internally exploded every powder

magazine and bit of gunpowder on your vessels. It literally blew them up from inside. That's why it was so swift and sudden, so silent."

One of the officers shuddered spasmodically, whispering, "If you'd left the power on still longer, you'd have cooked every one of us alive."

Kortha looked at him. One of the younger men looked sick. He turned away.

"You were generous," exclaimed an older officer. "In your place—"

"You men are part of Mars. My quarrel was not with you. I need you, to build Mars up again, to make her one with Earth, one with Venus. We must unite the clans, make the Confederacy strong as ever. Then we shall send deputies to Earth and Venus.

"I rather think that this time they shall listen to us."

He said again, "Go to your ships. Have them refitted and repaired. Then return for me, two weeks from today."

The officers bowed and departed.

Ilse stirred in Kortha's arm, looking up at him.

"Two weeks?" she whispered.

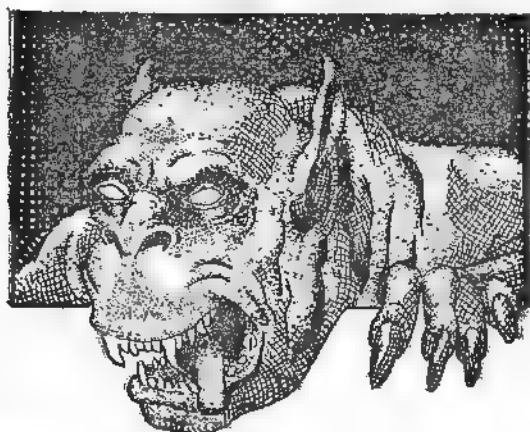
"You and I are returning to the Blue Grotto. After I get my real personality back—minus my red-hot temper—we will return to Ruuzol."

His hands drew her to him.

"Two weeks is a short honeymoon, but for an old hermit like me it will be an eternity of happiness!"

Their lips met avidly, as the shadows of the departing fliers flickered one by one across their bodies, and disappeared over the horizon.

Across the empty red plains of Ruuzol rolled a tumble. Xax was going home.



SURVIVAL

By BASIL WELLS

Mindless creatures mewled and grovelled in the streets of Ohio . . . and men found themselves suddenly in the swampy, alien hell of Venus, fighting a weird battle for existence.

THE EXPERIMENT FLOPPED, or perhaps, more accurately speaking, it succeeded only too well.

The theory had been that of plucking the ego from one human domicile and transplanting it, temporarily of course, into the brain of another man—or animal. The machine had been built for the same purpose.

Circuits shorted and the resultant blast of power killed Doctor Brixson and his elderly assistant, Elmer Morgus. And outward the circle of unleashed power extended for a mile from Crayton College.

The egos, wrenched from their rightful places, went hurtling outward into space on the light-speeding wave of the blast and contacted that of life on our sister planet, Venus. And mindless things grovelled and mewled in the streets of Crayton, Ohio. . . .

Only since the *Malcolm's* successful voyage to Venus, recently, has the full story of that catastrophe been known. From the lips of the rubbery hided, hideous Venusians who came to Earth aboard the spacer we learned the truth.

This, then is the story of those Earthlings flung into that swampy alien hell of a world by the freakish blast of an experimental patchwork of wires, tubes, and odd scraps of quartz. It is the tale of their battle for survival in a sodden unfriendly environment:

Glade Masson, timid, myopic history professor at Crayton College, jerked his head from the dank grayish ooze of the hollow where he lay. His eyes snapped wide as he examined the foggy outlines of bushes and twisting vines surrounding him. Further than the length of two bodies he could not see,

"Lo," a croaking voice mumbled from close by.

Masson looked up into the blinking round dark eyes of the alien creature. He examined the naked human-shaped animal curiously as he came to his feet.

That the strange being was intelligent he realized at once; the sharp dagger of splintered bone depending from a cross band of mildewed hide told him that. But the noseless, broad-joweled face; the hairless slick grayness of the froglike body, shading to a dark purple around the two eyes and the generous slit of a mouth; the webbed hands and feet, and the drooping pointed ears were anything but human.

"A frog!" he gasped, amazed, "an intelligent batrachian!" He rubbed his hand across his eyes, and arrested the motion.

His hand was webbed and gray! He had six fingers instead of five! And his sleek body was naked save for the crossed belts of ridged hide supporting his own two daggers.

Masson belched. This strange new body of his had dined on fish he discovered, and probably very overripe fish at that. He flexed his thick gray arms, admiring the ripple of sleek hard muscle. Blood was pumping and throbbing through his body with the excitement of the moment. For almost the first time in his forty years of myopic boyhood and timid manhood Glade Masson felt alive.

Luxuriantly the man from Earth stretched. He saw an expression that he took to be amazement cross the strange being's features. The purple deepened around the other male's sunken nostrils.

"I," the frog man said, "am Doctor John Lawler!"

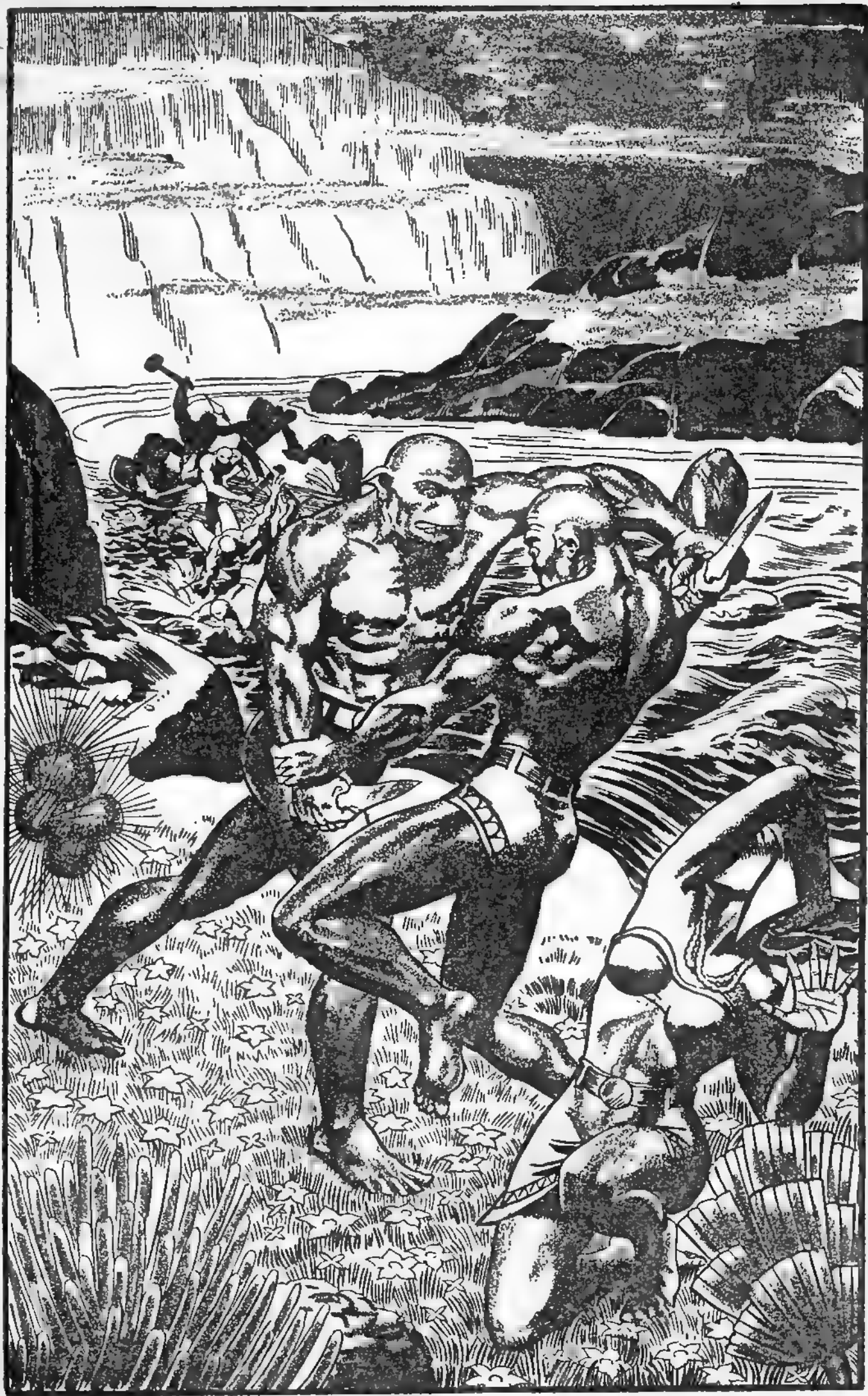


Illustration by DOOLIN

Masson's mouth dropped open. What must have happened back there in Crayton? His last memory was of a horrible wrenching at his delicate stomach, and then an abrupt blacking out of the auditorium. Apparently his ego, and that of Doctor Lawler as well, had by some mysterious means been exchanged with that of these froglike beings.

Suddenly he smiled. This was probably another of his nightmares. He would shut his eyes, pinch himself hard, and command himself to awaken.

He pinched. He heard Lawler screech in terror. Slowly he opened his eyes.

An ugly beast, a reptilian monster of scales and gaping tooth-lined snout, came lumbering toward him on stubby crooked legs. Ten feet in length was the alligator-like saurian, its lumpy black plates sprouting an ugly ridge of yellowish spines along its back down to its broad flat tail.

Masson took to his heels. He bounded away across the springy carpet of water-logged vines after the fading sounds of the Doctor's spurting webbed feet.

Fog closed in around him. Twice he fell into seemingly bottomless pools of water and his alien body surfaced him instinctively and dragged him ashore so he could continue his flight. No longer did he hear the running feet of Doctor Lawler; yet he continued to run.

So it was that he came into a section of the vine-floored mistiness where stubby leafy-boled shrubs grew from the spongy soil, and as he approached closer to the pale-leaved little trees, he heard the excited babble of slurred half-familiar words. He looked more closely at the trees then, to discover that just above his head a thatch of living vines, leaves and grasses topped each pulpy yellowish trunk.

Gray faces, hideous and limp of ear, peered down at him. He had come across a village of the frog people! From the trees of this sunless foggy jungle they had fashioned shelters of a sort.

As his breathing eased he could hear them more plainly. No wonder their speech sounded familiar, he realized, they were speaking English! Lawler and he were not alone then. Probably all of Crayton was here—possibly all of Ohio!

"I tell you," that was Charles Ellis, the chemistry department head, "I'm positive

this is not Earth. May sound crazy to you, but I'm sure this is the planet Venus."

Masson nodded his head in agreement, but some of the other men snorted their disgust.

"Impossible," grunted one scarred old frog-man, blinking his one good eye and flapping his ears at a persistent buzzing insect winging around his hairless skull. "I say this must be the Amazon River country—though how we came here I wouldn't know."

"No familiar fauna and flora," Ellis said shrugging. "Nope. I disagree. The only logical choice is Venus or perhaps a similar environment in another dimensional plane." He got to his feet and walked across the rough floor of the large hut toward the descending ladder of lashed poles. "But I'll not argue with you," he concluded. "We must hang together now as never before."

MASSON followed his friend down the ladder. As he descended into the misty sea of fog he regarded the changed village that a score of this watery world's days had seen created. The boles of the trees had been utilized as foundation piles for more substantial and water-tight structures, and now the two thousand and twenty-nine exiles from Earth were well-housed.

"This is the reality, Charles," Masson said, his wide sunken nostrils drinking deep of the thick moist air. "Already our life back on Earth seems an unpleasant dream. Here the swamplands furnish us food in plenty and the temperature seldom varies more than a few degrees."

The steady dark eyes of Ellis regarded Masson seriously. Then he lifted the crude spear, bone-tipped and heavy, and touched the curved projection of the bow above his shoulder.

"Three times," he said, "we have been attacked by hostile natives. Only our superior weapons have given us the advantage." He paused. "The next time we may not be so lucky. The frogs may have copied our spears and bows."

"That is the reason we must not be satisfied. We must build machines and better weapons for our own protection. Here on Venus we are but a handful of aliens surrounded by millions of hostile savages."

Masson grunted doubtfully. "With what," he inquired, "are we to build machines? All the islands that we have visited by raft or swimming are like this one—soggy floating atolls of thidin vines and nik-nik brush. The natives have no metal weapons; even flint seems unknown."

Ellis rammed his webbed gray hand down into the pouch that hung at his side. When it emerged again a sharp fragment of black glassy rock lay in his palm. He grinned at Masson's amazement.

"One of the Frogs," he said, "that we captured yesterday had this on a loop of leather around his neck. With the few words we have learned and signs I learned that a mountain of this material lies toward the east."

"Land!" was all Masson could gasp. Reverently he fingered the bit of glassy obsidian. His eyes blinked with excitement and his grotesque slash of a mouth quivered.

"What are we waiting for?" he demanded eagerly. "Let's get going."

Ellis laughed tolerantly. "The island lies some distance away," he said. "We will need good rafts, or, better, canoes. Hostile natives probably live in the mudlands surrounding the island."

"Let's get to work on it then," urged Glade Masson. "We can kill a lot of these alligator-jawed vallids and use their skins for boat covering. The Eskimos do that. And we can make shields of their hides, too. We'll need extra arrows, food, and other supplies."

"Go to it," laughed Ellis. "Ten or fifteen of the younger men will probably want to go along." He blinked his round black eyes solemnly. "And you're the guy that was satisfied with things as they are."

THE LITTLE FLOTILLA of skin-covered canoes threaded its way among the misty islets of pale green thidin vines. Ten of the unwieldy craft there were, and in all save the two larger boats two powerfully muscled Frogs sat. The larger boats carried three paddlers and were well-laden with dried vallid flesh, broiled thidin shoots, and heaps of the scarlet-mottled orange nik-nik fruit.

"Hear about Susan Martin?" inquired Ellis as he dipped his paddle rhythmically

into the sullen waters of the mist-shrouded sea.

"Nope." Masson's head did not turn. His canoe was leading the expedition. "Heard she was visiting Crayton, but never heard what happened to her."

"Always lecturing about birth control and child psychology," chuckled Ellis. "As uncompromising a spinster as ever I met. Well, that's all changed now. She finds herself with a family of seven young Frogs on her hands."

"Whew!" gasped Masson. "Bet she hates that."

"Oddly enough," the chemistry instructor said, "she's taking to being a mother enthusiastically. Her seven little Frogs will be the neatest, best-scrubbed, insufferable little prigs in all New Crayton—even old Joe Hansel, the ex-town drunkard. He's her next-to-the youngest son."

Masson shook his hairless gray head thoughtfully. The mystery of the switching of his neighbors' and friends' egos with the former inhabitants of these tough gray bodies never ceased to amaze him. The former sex of their transferred intelligences had been preserved, but not their age.

"Something like Cunningham, the campus heart-breaker," he said. "Only he ended up an old, hideously wrinkled Frog."

"And a good end for him," cried Ellis warmly, "he was. . . ."

"Ssst," warned Masson peering along a steaming tunnel of vision that a chance breath of moist air had opened. "A raft, and half a dozen Frogs!"

They relayed the word back to the seven smaller craft and four of them swiftly drew abreast of the canoe of Masson and Ellis. The other three canoes remained to guard the cargo boats with their three paddlers.

"We'll investigate," ordered Masson softly. "Unless they attack, do not harm them. With the few words of their language we have learned perhaps we can find where the rocky island is located."

"Fat chance," growled the huge-shouldered scarred young Frog whose name was Dolan. "They attack and talk later."

"Those are orders," said Masson firmly, his eyes boring into those of the other. "When you elected me leader of this expedition I took full control. Suggestions I

will listen to, but you must follow orders!"

Dolan's eyes wavered. "I didn't say nothing," he grunted.

Two canoes slipped silently away to the left and the other two sped toward the right. Masson continued straight ahead toward the raft.

Suddenly the mist parted. The foggy outlines of a half-dozen Frogs were revealed. And across the crudely plaited surface of the raft of buoyant thidin stalks lay the bound body of a young female Frog. Masson had time to see that the female wore a brief skirt and confining band of beaten vegetable fiber—a woman stolen from their own village of New Crayton—before the natives hurled their lumpy cudgels of nik-nik at him.

He ducked. The clubs missed, only one of them thudding into the hide-bound gunwale beside him, and then the frog men had plunged into the familiar medium of the warm sea. They swam swiftly toward the two men in the boat, their bone knives in their powerful webbed fists.

Masson hurled his spear at one of them. A gurgling cry of pain attested to the accuracy of his aim. He saw Ellis' spear leap forward and bury itself in the sea, and then his bow was in his hands and the bowstring swiftly nocking into the bone-tipped shaft of an arrow. But the frog men were upon them.

The other canoes converged then. Arrows frothed the water around the swimming savages. Blood dyed the water with shifting red. And the ghastly coils of glistening snake-like things of the deep, attracted by the blood, fought for the bodies. The water boiled into frenzy as shark-like fish came also and battled with the coiling scavengers of the deep. The canoes rocked and threatened to swamp despite the frantic paddling of the men.

All of the Frogs were dead, but their raft bobbed, unharmed, outward from the seething cauldron of fighting monsters. The bound woman watched with fearful eyes as Masson and Ellis paddled closer, and then she cried out with joy as she saw their weapons and the simple breech clouts.

"Thank God," she gasped, as Masson stepped aboard and freed her bonds. She chafed gently at the swollen flesh where her gray-skinned legs and arms had been bound.

MASSON swallowed. Hideous though she might have been by any Earthly standards, to him she was beautiful. Her body was firm and shapely and her eyes were soft and liquid. And in his body there coursed the blood of the Frog People. Already he was forgetting the standards of beauty back on Earth. Grace, strength, and the clean-cut planes of the body are the secret of loveliness.

"I cannot blame them for stealing you," he said, thick-tongued. "I have not seen you before in New Crayton. Who are you?"

"Irene Croft," she said, smiling. "And you, I know, are Glade Masson. I saw you working on these canoes before I was captured."

The ex-instructor of history felt his mouth drop open. This most charming of all females he had seen on Venus was Irene Croft? Croft, the slab-sided, bony woman who had taught languages at Crayton College—the fussy old maid without a saving grace or charm save her intelligence and quick understanding? They had been good friends back there on Earth, but now—well, friendship would not be enough.

"Irene," he said enthusiastically, "you're a—a—honey."

His face turned purple as she smiled her gracious acceptance of his compliment. Words gurgled impotently in his throat as he helped her aboard the canoe.

"Son," said Charles Ellis gruffly, "you've got it bad. And," he scowled at the trim figure sitting between them, "I don't blame you."

This time it was Irene's face and neck that purpled delicately.

"Sorry we can't take you back to New Crayton," said Masson, his grin anything but sorry, "but we must be almost to the rocky island we are hunting."

The girl flashed a quick smile at Masson, a smile that would have given the ordinary Earthman a series of nightmares. "You are right about the island," she said. "I have picked up a fair knowledge of the speech of the Butrads."

"So that's what they call themselves," broke in Ellis. "Sorry, Miss Croft. Go on."

"The island is called Tular," she said. "They were taking me there to give me as a bride to the God-From-the-Clouds, as I

translated it, but I feel sure that I was to be sacrificed in some ghastly religious fashion."

"From-Clouds," Ellis was musing. "Probably a meteorite." His face brightened. "A meteorite may mean iron!" he cried.

Masson's paddle dipped steadily into the murky waters of the cast sea that covers all Venus. Floating miniature islets of thidin swirled past, islets that some day might grow to be huge, matted sub-continents of green life. Ghostly islands of thidin, their swampy floors giving root to the stocky trees and shrubs of the Venusian jungle growth, loomed out of the endless blanket of fog. The throaty deep roar of the scaly vallids and the splash of their bodies broke the thick silence.

"And iron means machines, and weapons," he said thoughtfully, without turning around. "Machines—and plows. Weapons—and hoes. We will build factories, but we will also build homes."

Irene's voice cut across their musings. "Supposing the meteor is not iron?" she demanded.

"The sea is full of metal," said Ellis doggedly. "We will take magnesium from it. We did it on Earth. And the island will contain metal—it must."

"Spears!" called Masson unexpectedly, and then, tersely, "vallids just ahead."

The canoes slowed and sheered off from the pulpy underwater shelf of the island Masson had almost rammed. Hundreds of the scaly monsters floated sleepily in the water, their yellow spines and bulging eyes carpeting the shallow depths for several acres. Ashore dozens of others crawled about on their stubby bowed legs searching for the tasty vegetable tidbits that their saurian palates desired.

Luckily none of the vallids saw them, or if they did they were not interested, and they backed water until the eternal low-lying clouds of the wet planet shielded their ungainly craft from view. They commenced paddling cautiously away toward the right only to again encounter the shore of an island swarming with the ugly snouted saurians.

At intervals they attempted to proceed again in the direction they had been heading but always they encountered more vallids and the low-lying shore of an island.

An idea was beginning to dawn in Masson's gray-skinned skull. This must be a larger island than any they had before encountered.

"Perhaps," he said, as the other canoes drew abreast, "this is the shore of Tular. There would be swamplands and mud flats if it were. Thidin would grow up about the central mountain."

A slim-faced frog man named Reppart nodded. "Probably you're right," he agreed. "Never saw so many vallids before." He shrugged his shoulders. "But how do we get through them to the land?"

"Should be a river." Ellis was dipping out the water that the ceaseless heavy mist of rain poured into the boat. He gestured with the hollow gourd-shaped husk of a nik-nik fruit. "We follow the river in."

"But we have found no river," sneered Dolan. "What now, General Masson?"

Irene Croft's softer voice cut across their conversation.

"But we *have* found the river," she said. "See the current pushing out toward us from the island? And the color of the water is different, grayer."

"You're right," cried Masson exultantly. He picked up his paddle and sent the canoe probing forward into the thick murk of the cloudy wall ahead.

THREE, OR PERHAPS four miles the men from Earth paddled upstream along a mile-wide channel that carried the steady surge of the river seaward. They came at last to the first waterfall, a low rocky shelf that lifted but five feet above the green floor of swampy thidin vines and the grayish ooze that floored them.

The firmness of rock was welcome underfoot. The slow darkness of the Venusian night was falling and so they made their camp on a level shelf of rock a few hundred feet back from the waterfall's muted roar.

And with morning they pushed onward up the river.

The stream forked a mile above the first waterfall. They chose the larger stream on the right and paddled between low sullen black cliffs of basalt for perhaps another three miles. Here a lake spread outward fanwise from three giant cataracts that boomed and frothed as they poured over a sheer hundred-foot precipice.

"Power," said Masson. "Power enough for a dozen Pittsburghs. Power to light all the cities of Earth."

"This is a large island," Ellis nodded. "Such a volume of water requires an enormous watershed." He smiled confidently. "There will be metal here. This will be the home of our children."

Masson found his hand had unconsciously clasped that of Irene. He pressed the velvety softness of the webbed fingers and the woman's eyes lifted curiously to his own. A steady, intense glow burned far back in their depths. Her lips parted, unsmiling.

"Our children," he whispered softly, and her eyes dropped as purple spread slowly upward from her rounded firm neck.

She pressed his hand timidly; dropped it, and started up the rocky ledge that led from the lake's left-hand shore. And behind her climbed the frog men from the village of New Crayton.

Their canoes they had concealed in the tangled jungle growth. From here their feet would have to serve—their feet and the tough sandals of vallid hide that they now donned for the first time.

The sheer escarpment gave way to a vast level plain of jungle growth and swampy reeds. The jungle was almost impenetrable and so they decided to swim up the river. The eternal clouds of Venus seemed to have thinned as they climbed for now they stood within a grayish dome that extended a hundred feet or more on every hand.

As they approached the river they saw a huge raft of thidin bound about with sturdy vegetable withes and having a score of sturdy poles lashed to its rough surface. But for the increased range of their vision they would have missed the man-made little island.

Masson trimmed the green shoots that were already sprouting from the pole he had chosen. His bone knife broke as he hacked at a tough sprout.

"With our first iron," he said, "I will make an axe. The axe and the machete are the first tools of civilization."

Twice they climbed past mighty waterfalls again. They came, at last, to the fertile central plateau that stretched for three hundred miles away to the north and south and a third of that distance before them.

Four native villages they passed and four times Irene used her meager command of the Butrads' tongue to tell them that they were on pilgrimage to the God-From-The-Clouds, and that she was to be the god's bride. Apparently the ordinary inter-tribal warfare of the Butrads was held in abeyance where the God-From-The-Clouds was concerned.

They crossed park-like country, where beneath the pale-green trees a tough spear-bladed grass grew, and they slept at night in the shelter of broad-leaved trees that roofed over several acres of ground so completely that there were patches of dusty earth.

Masson sent Dillen, Marcy, Reppart, and Dolan back to report to the settlement at New Crayton. He advised that as many families as possible be ferried across the sea to Tular. Here on the upper plateau would be their new world.

THE day after the four messengers had left they came to the God-From-The-Clouds.

An ancient crater housed the god, a low-rimmed bowl five miles in diameter. The jungle had crept over the outer walls and far down the inner slopes to the edge of the lake within. The trail they followed ended abruptly at a cliff on whose brink a triangular block of greenish-black basalt rested. There were mounds of rounded white objects, human skulls, about the rough altar, but the broken white skeletons of the sacrifices lay thick about the god far below.

Irene shuddered. She hid her head on Masson's chest. "The brides of their god," she sobbed, "brides of the machine."

The god of the Butrads of Venus was a huge crumpled ball of metal—a space ship from some distant world!

A distant and alien world the battered craft must have come from, for the corridors and cabins were too small for the froglike bodies of the Earthmen to pass. Yet the space ship was gigantic by any standard—a quarter of a mile in diameter. There were strange corroded weapons and machines whose use the Earthmen could not fathom. There was sealed cargo—food that even yet was edible after long years of exposure to the heat and humidity of the Venusian upland.

The ship was a veritable storehouse of precious metals and equipment. Ellis set to work at once designing a dynamo and drew plans for a machine shop to be set up in a nearby cavern. Masson took two of the men and examined the defensive possibilities of the crater's upper rim—he feared the reaction of the Frogs when they learned of this desecration of the God-From-The-Clouds. Irene put two of the men at work clearing out another cave for a kitchen and sleeping rooms, and Gilroy, who had been a farmer, cruised the rich lava-fed flat along the lake's rain-speckled shore.

Busy days and nights passed. They lost all track of time. No word came from New Crayton but they were so busy they paid no heed. The waterfall that fed the crater lake now turned a dynamo, and electricity worked its magic. At the two passes that permitted descent into the crater guards were now posted, armed with crude muskets and grenades, and the signal that was to mark the approach of the party from New Crayton was three spaced shots.

"They are coming at last," cried Irene. The third shot echoed suddenly through the thick air. She tugged at Masson's arm. "We must go to meet them."

Laughing they raced up the trail from the crater's green depths to the high wall where the sentry stood guard. They stood beside him, breathless, for a moment. Then Masson's hand went out impulsively to the shoulder of the man.

"Gilroy, man!" he cried. "What is it?"

The guard's drooping shoulders straightened. Bitterly his webbed hand pointed.

A handful of Butrads, men from New Crayton by their arms and clothing, tramped wearily nearer. Masson counted them—thirty-three men. As he watched one of them dropped suddenly, an arrow in his back. Then for the first time did he see the misty shapes of the pursuers of this exhausted band.

They raced forward, hundreds of them, the naked frog-like savages of the lower river villages. Another of the hunted men dropped and Masson jerked the gun from Gilroy's hands and trained it on the horde of charging Butrads.

He fired. The sound of the shot, rather than the bullet, arrested the enemy advance

momentarily. From the harried little knot of men a faint cheer lifted and their pace quickened. A moment later Gilroy swung open the thick narrow gate and was helping the first of them through. Masson lobbed a grenade far out toward the island Frogs and they shrank yet farther away.

"Did our best." That was Reppart sobbing out his story. "Three hundred of us . . . rest of them decided to live easy back on the island. . . . Maybe they wasn't too dumb either. . . ."

"Anyhow the Frogs hit us at the first waterfall. . . . Finished off most of the women and children there. . . . We fought them all along the river . . . rest of the women died there. . . . Eighty of us reached the plateau."

"And thirty of you are left," finished Masson soberly. His round eyes blazed hot. "Fifty of us to conquer a watery jungle world. Fifty men against a planet."

He shook a knotted gray fist at the hostile natives. "There'll be no more contact with New Crayton," he said. "We cannot risk more of our manpower in futile warfare if we are to build a worthy civilization for our children. This crater must be our world for many years."

One of the men laughed bitterly, and then great racking sobs shook his stocky gray body.

"Children!" he cried. "All our children lie out there, unborn. Among us all there is only your woman."

Glade Masson swept his arm out toward the seething mob of the Butrads. "There are your children," he said. "The natives have daughters and sisters. Their blood is that of our own bodies. They will bear us children. We and our children will conquer and rule the water wastes of Venus." He paused for a long moment.

"To survive," he said flatly, "we must fight with all means at our command. We must steal, we must kill, and we must work. If we do not steal the females of the Butrads, Earth's culture and wisdom will shortly vanish. If we do not kill we will be killed."

The round dark eyes of the listening Earthmen brightened with new hope. Croaking sounds of approval issued from their ugly slashes of mouth. And hopeless sloping shoulders straightened.

SO IT WAS THAT they raided the villages of the Frogs again and again. The females of the surrounding uplands proved to be intelligent, and shortly most of them were happy in the safety and comfort of the building town of the Earthmen.

They mated with the men and learned the strange customs and speech of their captors.

But there was trouble looming ahead. As the months passed and the eggs of the females failed to hatch Masson and Ellis realized that their little colony was doomed to extinction.

"The women tell the same story, Glade," said Ellis, his nervous webbed fingers drumming at the table in his tiny office.

Masson looked out through the window at the men moving about their tasks in the factory and further down beside the lake, in the fields. They worked listlessly, hopelessly. What was there to work for now?

"So the old women of the tribes carried the eggs away and hid them?" Masson rubbed the unlovely flesh of his jowls thoughtfully. "They were forbidden to follow. Taboo or something of the sort. And then the old females brought back the young ones?"

"Could be, of course," said Ellis doubtfully, "that they are concealing the truth. Lying to us." He shook his head. "But I doubt it. Most of them are glad to be safe here where raiding tribes and the more vicious saurians cannot reach them. They learn fast, too," he added.

"Nothing to do," Masson said grimly, "but for me to trail the old women. I'll take Dolan. He's never satisfied unless he's prowling the jungles outside the crater."

"I'm going, too," Ellis began, but Masson shook his head.

"Your knowledge of chemistry and metallurgy are needed here," he said. "If I am lost you can carry on, but you are the only living text book available."

And he overrode the other's protests.

Later in the day Masson and Dolan slipped out through the barrier at the crater's rim and made their way toward the nearest Butrad village. They took with them plenty of ammunition and supplies,

for they expected to be gone for many days.

"There they go, Glade!" Joe Dolan's scarred face twisted in a hideous parody of a grin.

They lay in the lush oozy bed of rotted growth above the shallow ravine where the Frog village lay. Nik-nik brush and giant broad-leaved grass of mottled yellow and green concealed them from the eyes of the Butrads in the ugly huddle of elevated huts below.

"Ten old females," went on Dolan. "Maybe they can carry twenty eggs apiece in their baskets." He whistled. "That'd be two hundred."

"How," asked Masson, "can you whistle with a mouth like that? I've tried dozens of times."

Dolan chuckled. "It's a gift," he said, and came to his hands and knees.

"Take your time," cautioned Masson. "Just so we keep them in sight."

The ravine narrowed and became a vertical-walled tunnel of thidin vines and scaly gray rock. Masson and Joe Dolan lost sight of the slow-moving party of Frogs at times as they moved along the rim of the deep slot. And as they followed, the floor of the ravine fell further away beneath them; they were climbing high into the stunted cliffs and peaks of Tular's interior.

Night came and they slept above the stopping place of the ten Butrad ancients. And with morning they pushed upward through the soupy fog again.

Abruptly the upward slanting slope ended. They looked out over a roughly oval bowl of slowly writhing mist and cloud.

Dimly they saw the floor of the cavity. Several hundred acres of jungle-clad raggedness. Miniature buttes, mesas, and cliffs split the bowl into a hell of broken terrain, and here and there, near the black pocks of caverns in the rimming cliff walls, there showed little huddles of Butrad huts.

"The Place of Birth," Masson said slowly. "All the tribes of the island must come here."

Dolan nodded and rubbed the palm of his hand over the whetted edge of his hunting knife. "Plenty of guards stationed around the only entrances, he said, 'just

as you expected. I'll have to kill them off."

Masson shook his head. "That would warn them. I may need weeks to learn the secret of their system of hatching the eggs." His webbed gray hand swept in a short arc.

"Some of those caves must have other entrances. From the rim perhaps. That's what we'll look for."

Dolan shrugged. "Right you are," he agreed.

"My theory is," Masson said, "that Venus was formerly much warmer than it is now. For that reason the incubation temperature must be artificially raised. The question is: how much and how long must the eggs be artificially warmed. And do they use pools of all-but boiling water, or is the heat comparatively dry?"

"That's for you to find out," said Dolan. "Me, I'm nothing but a truck driver. I ain't no college-brain guy."

"You do all right," said Masson, grinning. "You seem to find your way around the jungle easy as a native."

"Huh," snorted Dolan. "Ten years hammering the pavements and dodging traffic does that. You gotta have a quick eye and remember what you're doing."

Masson got to his feet and moved back from the brink.

"Let's start hunting," he suggested.

THEY CROUCHED TOGETHER in the dark shadows of the tunnel that opened a dozen feet above the floor of the large cavern. Down there, in the gray half-light that filtered in through the outer entrance, they saw three small heaps of vegetation steaming silently and the two old females who tended them.

From time to time one of the old females filled a hollow husk from the nik-nik fruit with water and sprinkled it over the three mounds. The eggs they had seen the ancient ones bury so carefully were soaking up the moist warmth.

Masson jogged Dolan's elbow, and they crawled carefully back along the low-roofed passage toward the vine-festooned entrance five hundred feet above. Water and gray ooze sloshed underfoot as they walked along level reaches of the way, and always the wet rock was slippery.

"We know how the eggs are hatched

now," he said, "and with experience we can learn to gauge the proper temperature. But until we have perfected the procedure our families will not increase very rapidly."

Dolan gulped. "I dunno if I want one of them ugly looking things we saw in that side pen," he said.

"They're no uglier than you are, Joe," chuckled Masson. "Hunt up a pool of clear water and look at yourself sometime." He gripped Dolan's arm.

"But that's what I was thinking about," he went on. "About that side pen in the cave where the newly hatched Butrads are kept. We kidnaped the Frogs' women, so. . . ."

"Why not their kids?" Dolan laughed. "We seem to be going in for crime in a big way."

"The young ones will have a better chance for living to adulthood," argued Masson. "We're doing them a favor. And the Frogs can't know whose children are gone and whose are left."

"Sounds all right the way you put it," agreed Dolan. "Maybe because I want to believe it. But will the little brats have brains enough to soak up education?"

"I'm sure of it, Joe. All they need is opportunity."

"So I'm to go back and get ten or twelve other guys," said Dolan, "and we'll clean out this Frog nursery."

"Right. I'll stay here and watch the whole procedure. Don't hurry back. Maybe a week or so will be better."

"Okay, Glade," said the scarred giant, moving at a crouch along the low-roofed way. "Be seeing you."

A turn in the ascending tunnel smothered the last low-sopken words, and Masson was left alone.

The blind men came into the cavern at the direction of the wrinkled old hags. They carefully stripped away layer upon layer of vegetation from the smallest and brownest mound.

Masson leaned further out over the rim of the hole above the cavern floor to watch. He had feared that the party of men from the crater would arrive before he could see the uncovering of a mound and the hatching of the Frog eggs.

The last layer of thidin and grass came away and perhaps a hundred of the leath-

ery bluish ovoids lay revealed on their steaming warm nest. They were shapeless and limply alive now, that leather-hard outer shell rendered soft and rotten by the steady warmth of the heating vegetation. Masson saw two tiny monsters already free from their outgrown prisons as the blind men began scooping them up and carrying them to the empty pen beside the ones already occupied.

The young Butrads set up a throaty, hoarse bellowing that made the cave vibrate. It was not their feeding time but the excitement had aroused them and they knew but this one way to express their displeasure. Masson started to crawl back from the passage's outer lip even as the two old females started throwing thidin shoots and scraps of raw fish to the screeching young ones.

And the rotten gray rock betrayed him. A dozen times in the past eight days he had leaned out over the rim to watch, and a dozen times the rock had supported his weight. But this time it went scaling away, a great slab of it, and with it went the Earthman.

THE blind men whirled from the half-full pen and came lunging at him. The old females screeched throaty harsh orders. And Masson raised the gun that he somehow had managed to cling to.

"Go back," he ordered in the language of the Butrads, "go out of the cave before I kill."

"He is but one," croaked the ancient ones, "destroy the desecrator of the Place of Birth."

Now Masson could see that the eyes of the four Frog males had been neatly gouged from their sockets in days past. Probably they were blinded that they might not see the forbidden magic of the eggs that became Frogs. Or perhaps they were blinded that they might not escape from the birth caves into the outer jungles.

Yet in the semi-gloom of the cave they were not at too great a disadvantage. They listened for the movement of Masson's body, and the breath of his lungs guided them. The young of the Butrads were silent, too. The sudden quiet was a roar in his ears.

They closed in, great chunks of stone clenched in their fists. A Frog with

but a club or a crude spear would have been beaten. But the puny hollow tube of metal that the Earthman carried held the strength of many heavy clubs and many huge rocks in its miniature pebbles of shaped copper.

Masson fired and a Frog went down. The other three came on uncertainly, and he fired again. The two remaining Butrads stopped.

"There are many of them, Old Ones," one of them cried. "They have struck down Trew and Brun with thunder."

"There is only one!" cried the wrinkled old females. "Kill him! Strike him down!"

"Do not listen to the Old Ones," Masson warned. "I have captured the thunder. With it I strike you down."

The blind men hesitated, and Masson sent a bullet smoking between their legs. They backed away toward the entrance, the females with them. And a moment later Masson was piling fragments of rock and crumbling shale into a barricade before the cavern's mouth.

He could hold them off for a time he knew, until night at least, even though they brought the guards from the outer entrances to the bowl to aid the blind men.

Again and again the guards had attacked the cave where Masson lay holed up. All that day they had come crawling through the dense matted growth to launch their arrows and spears at him. Fifty or sixty of them there had been, he estimated, and at least forty blood-hungry Butrads still faced him. These were the outer guards.

With the coming of night the blinded workers of the caves would join them, and with their uncanny sense of hearing and touch they would overrun the cave. The Frogs were not a cowardly race, and his invasion into this, their most taboo and sacred place, made them all the more fanatical in their hatred.

Masson had until night. After that, unless he escaped back through the tunnel, he would die. And if he left the young Frogs behind he would never again be able to raid this cavern. Already they were hungry, their throaty shrilled cries beating at his droop-tipped ears.

Perhaps the din from within dulled his hearing. For tough naked hide scraped

on rock and the heavy breathing of the wounded blind man should have been clearly audible otherwise. Masson must have heard him approaching at the last for he was half-turned when the rough fragment of grayish shale came thudding down. He twisted away from the weighty missile, but even so it grazed along his skull and he went down into the blackness of nothingness for a time.

He awakened to look into the hot dark eyes of a Frog who had crept to within a few paces of his barricade.

The rifle was yet in his grip and through blinding flashes of pain he somehow found the strength to aim and squeeze trigger. The ugly gray face vanished and he painfully fed another cartridge into the rifle's single chamber. The weight across his back did not go away, and twisting his head he saw that the blind Butrad's body had slumped across his own.

Masson slid the weight off but the blackness came again; so he rested for a time. And this time the blackness had come to stay for it was night. The sun had finally

been swallowed by the cloud layers that swath Venus eternally.

He tried to crawl back toward the tunnel, but how he was to climb the sheer wall to the escape passage he did not know. He could not raise his body from the ground on the level.

Once again the pain in his head returned and pain flashed its lightning. His eyes clenched themselves shut and he fought off the giddy waves of weakness. After a time he could feel again, and see.

There was light in the cave, light and the grayish flabby-hided bodies of Butrads. He tried to raise the rifle and a webbed hand knocked it from his grasp.

"None of that, now," a voice ordered, and his unbelieving ears recognized that of Joe Dolan.

Rifles cracked at the cave entrance and he saw the larger young ones of the Butrads being hoisted up to the escape tunnel. And he grinned weakly up at Dolan's hideous scarred face.

The future of the Earthmen on the Watery World was safe now.



DEFENSE MECH

By RAY BRADBURY

Halloway stared down at Earth, and his brain tore loose and screamed, Man, man, how'd you get in a mess like this, in a rocket a million miles past the moon, shooting for Mars and danger and terror and maybe death.

Illustrated by DOOLIN

OH, MY GOD, do you realize how far from Earth we are? Do you really *think* about it? It's enough to scare the guts from a man. Hold me up. *Do something. Give me sedatives or hold my hand or run call mama. A million cold miles up. See all the flickering stars? Look at my hands tremble. Feel my heart whirling like a hot pinwheel!*

The captain comes toward me, a stunned expression on his small, tight face. He takes my arm, looking into my eyes. Hello, captain. I'm sick, if that's what you want to know. I've a right to be scared—just look at all that space! Standing here a moment ago, I stared down at Earth so round and cloud-covered and asleep on a mat of stars, and my brain tore loose and screamed, man, man, how'd you get in a mess like this, in a rocket a million miles past the moon, shooting for Mars with a crew of fourteen others! I can hardly stand up, my knees, my hands, my heart, are shaking apart. Hold me up, sir.

What are hysterics like? The captain unprongs the inter-deck audio and speaks swiftly, scowling, into it. I hope he's phoning the psychiatrist. I need something. Oh, dammit, dammit!

The psychiatrist descends the ladder in immaculate salt-white uniform and walks toward me in a dream. Hello, doctor. You're the one for me. Please, sir, turn this damned rocket around and fly back to New York. I'll go crazy with all this space and distance!

The psychiatrist and the captain's voices murmur and blend, with here and there an emphasis, a toss of head, a gesture:

"Young Halloway here's on a fear-jag, doctor. Can you help him?"

"I'll try. Good man, Halloway is. Imagine you'll need him and his muscles when we land."

"With the crew as small as it is, every man's worth his weight in uranium. He's *got* to be cured."

The psychiatrist shakes his head.

"Might have to squirt him full of drugs to keep him quiet the rest of the expedition."

The captain explodes, saying that is impossible. Blood drums in my head. The doctor moves closer, smelling clean, sharp and white.

"Please, understand, captain, this man is definitely psychotic about going home. His talk is almost a reversion to childhood. I can't refuse his demands, and his fear seems too deeply based for reasoning. However, I think I've an idea. Halloway?"

Yes, sir? Help me, doctor. I want to go home. I want to see popcorn exploding into a buttered avalanche inside a glass cube, I want to roller skate, I want to climb into the old cool wet ice-wagon and go *chikk-chikk-chikk* on the ice with a sharp pick, I want to take long sweating hikes in the country, see big brick buildings and bright-faced people, fight the old gang, anything but this—*awful!*

The psychiatrist rubs his chin.

"All right, son. You can go back to Earth, now, tonight."

Again the captain explodes.

"You can't tell him *that*. We're landing on Mars *today!*"

The psychiatrist pats down the captain patiently.

"Please, captain. Well, Halloway, back to New York for you. How does it sound?"

I'm not not so scared now. We're going



down on the moving ladder and here is the psychiatrist's cubicle.

He's pouring lights into my eyes. They revolve like stars on a disc. Lots of strange machines around, attachments to my head, my ears. Sleepy, Oh, so sleepy. Like

under warm water. Being pushed around. Laved. Washed. Quiet. Oh, gosh. Sleepy.

"—listen to me, Halloway—"

Sleepy. Doctor's talking. Very soft, like feathers. Soft, soft.

"—you're going to land on earth. No

matter what they tell you, you're landing on Earth . . . no matter what happens you'll be on Earth . . . everything you see and do will be like on earth . . . remember that . . . remember that . . . you won't be afraid because you'll be on Earth . . . remember that . . . over and over . . . you'll land on Earth in an hour . . . home . . . home again . . . no matter what anyone says. . . ."

Oh, yes, sir, home again. Sleepy. Home again. Drifting, sleeping, oh thank you, sir, thank you from the bottom of my drowsy, sleepy soul. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Sleepy. Drifting.

I'M AWAKE!

Hey, everybody, come look! Here comes Earth! Right at us, like a green moss ball off a bat! Coming at us on a curve!

"Check stations! Mars landing!"

"Get into bulgers! Test atmosphere!"

Get into your *what* did he say?

"Your baseball uniform, Halloway. Your baseball uniform."

Yes, sir. My baseball uniform. Where'd I put it? Over here. Head into, legs into, feet into it. There. Ha, this is great! Pitch her in here, old boy, old boy! *Smack!* Yow!

Yes, sir, it's over in that metal locker. I'll take it out. Head, arms, legs into it—I'm dressed. Baseball uniform. Ha! This is great! Pitch 'er in here, ole boy, ole boy! *Smack!* Yow!

"Adjust bulger helmets, check oxygen."

What?

"Put on your catcher's mask, Halloway."

Oh. The mask slides down over my face. Like that. The captain comes rushing up, eyes hot green and angry.

"Doctor, what's this infernal nonsense?"

"You wanted Halloway able to do his work, didn't you, captain?"

"Yes, but what in hell've you done to him?"

Strange. As they talk, I hear their words flow over my head like a wave dashed on a sea-stone, but the words drain off, leaving no imprint. As soon as some words invade my head, something eats and digests them and I think the words are something else entirely.

The psychiatrist nods at me.

"I couldn't change his basic desire. Given

time, yes, a period of months, I could have. But you need him *now*. So, against all the known ethics of my profession, which say one must never lie to a patient, I've followed along in his own thought channel. I didn't dare frustrate him. He wanted to go home, so I *let* him. I've given him a fantasy. I've set up a protective defense mechanism in his mind that refuses to believe certain realities, that evaluates all things from its own desire for security and home. His mind will automatically block any thought or image that endangers that security."

The captain stares wildly.

"Then, then Halloway's insane!"

"Would you have him mad with fear, or able to work on Mars hindered by only a slight 'tetched' condition? Coddle him and he'll do fine. Just remember, we're landing on Earth, *not* Mars."

"Earth, Mars, you'll have *me* raving next!"

The doctor and the captain certainly talk weirdly. Who cares? Here comes Earth! Green, expanding like a moist cabbage underfoot!

"Mars landing! Air-lock opened! Use bulger oxygen."

Here we go, gang! Last one out is a pink chimpanzee!

"Halloway, come back, you damn fool! You'll kill yourself!"

Feel the good sweet Earth! Home again! Praise the Lord! Let's dance, sing off-key, laugh! Ha! Oh, boy!

In the door of the house stands the captain, his face red and wrinkled, waving his fists.

"Halloway, come back! Look behind you, you fool!"

I whirl about and cry out, happily.

Shep! Shep, old dog! He comes running to meet me, long fur shining amber in the sunshine. Barking. Shep, I haven't seen you in years. Good old pooch. Come 'ere, Shep. Let me pet you.

The captain shrieks:

"Don't pet it! It looks like a carnivorous Martian worm. Man, the jaws on that thing! Halloway, use your knife!"

Shep snarls and shows his teeth. Shep, what's wrong? That's no way to greet me. Come on, Shep. Hey! I pull back my fingers as his swift jaws snap. Shep circles me, swiftly. You haven't rabies, have you,

Shep? He darts in, snatches my ankle with strong, locking white teeth! Lord, Shep, you're crazy! I can't let this go on. And you used to be such a fine, beautiful dog. Remember all the hikes we took into the lazy corn country, by the red barns and deep wells? Shep clenches tight my ankle. I'll give him one more chance. Shep, *let go!* Where did this long knife come from in my hand, like magic? Sorry to do this, Shep, but—*there!*

Shep screams, thrashing, screams again. My arm pumps up and down, my gloves are freckled with blood-flakes.

Don't scream, Shep. I *said* I was sorry, didn't I?

"Get out there, you men, and bury that beast immediately."

I glare at the captain. Don't talk that way about Shep.

The captain stares at my ankle.

"Sorry, Halloway. I meant, bury that 'dog,' you men. Give him full honors. You were lucky, son, another second and those knife-teeth'd bored through your ankle-cuff metal."

I don't know what he means. I'm wearing sneakers, sir.

"Oh, yeah, so you are. Yeah. Well, I'm sorry, Halloway. I know how you must feel about—Shep. He was a fine dog."

I think about it a moment and my eyes fill up, wet.

THERE'LL be a picnic and a hike; the captain says. Three hours now the boys have carried luggage from the metal house. The way they talk, this'll be some picnic. Some seem afraid, but who worries about copperheads and water-moccasins and crawfish? Not me. No, sir. Not me.

Gus Bartz, sweating beside me on some apparatus, squints at me.

"What's eatin' you, Halloway?"

I smile. Me? Nothing. Why?

"You and that act with that Martian worm."

What're you talking about? What worm?

The captain interrupts, nervously.

"Bartz, lay off Halloway. The doctor'll explain why. Ask him."

Bartz goes away, scratching his head.

The captain pats my shoulder.

"You're our strong-arm man, Halloway. You've got muscles from working on the

rocket engines. So keep alert today, eh, on your hike to look over the territory? Keep your—b.b. gun—ready."

Beavers, do you think, sir?

The captain swallows, hard and blinks.

"Unh—oh, beavers, yeah, beavers. Sure. Beavers! Maybe. Mountain lions and Indians, too, I hear. Never can tell. Be careful."

Mountain lions and Indians in New York in this day and age? Aw, sir.

"Let it go. Keep alert, anyhow. Smoke?"

I don't smoke, sir. A strong mind in a healthy body, you know the old rule.

"The old rule. Oh, *yes*. The *old* rule. Only joking. I don't want a smoke anyway. Like hell."

What was that last, sir?

"Nothing, Halloway, carry on, carry on."

I help the others work, now. Are we taking the yellow streetcar to the edge of town, Gus?

"We're using propulsion belts, skimming low over the dead seas."

How's that again, Gus?

"I said, we're takin' the yellow streetcar to the end of the line, yeah."

We're ready. Everyone's packed, spreading out. We're going in groups of four. Down Main Street past the pie factory, over the bridge, through the tunnel, past the circus grounds and we'll rendezvous, says the captain, at a place he points to on a queer, disjointed map.

Whoosh! We're off! I forgot to pay my fare.

"That's okay, I paid it."

Thanks, captain. We're really traveling. The cypresses and the maples flash by. *Kaawhoom!* I wouldn't admit this to anyone but you, sir, but momentarily, there, I didn't see this street-car. Suddenly we moved in empty space, nothing supporting us, and I didn't see any car. But *now* I see it, sir.

The captain gazes at me as at a nine-day miracle.

"You do, eh?"

Yes, sir. I clutch upward. Here's the strap. I'm holding it.

"You look pretty funny sliding through the air with your hand up like that, Halloway."

How's that, sir?

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Why are the others laughing at me, sir?

"Nothing, son, nothing. Just happy, that's all."

Ding Ding. Ding Ding. Canal Street and Washington. *Ding Ding. Whoosh.* This is real traveling. Funny, though, the captain and his men keep moving, changing seats, never stay seated. It's a long street-car. I'm way in back now. They're up front.

By the large brown house on the next corner stands a popcorn wagon, yellow and red and blue. I can taste the popcorn in my mind. It's been a long time since I've eaten some . . . if I ask the captain's permission to stop and buy a bag, he'll refuse. I'll just sneak off the car at the next stop. I can get back on the next car and catch up with the gang later.

HOW do you stop this car? My fingers fumble with my baseball outfit, doing something I don't want to know about. The car is stopping! Why's that. Popcorn is more important.

I'm off the car, walking. Here's the popcorn machine with a man behind it, fussing with little silver metal knobs.

"—murr—lokk—loc—cor—iz—"

Tony! Tony, bambino! What are you doing here?

"Click."

It can't be, but it is. Tony, who died ten long years ago, when I was a freckled kid! Alive and selling popcorn again. Oh, Tony, it's good to see you. His black moustache's so waxed, so shining, his dark hair like burnt oily shavings, his dark shining happy eyes, his smiling red cheeks! He shimmers in my eyes like in a cold rain. Tony! Let me shake your hand! Gimme a bag of popcorn, senior!

"Click-click-click—sput-click — reeeeeee-eeeeeeee—"

The captain didn't see you, Tony, you were hidden so well, only I saw you. Just a moment while I search for my nickel.

"Reeeeeee."

Whew, I'm dizzy. It's very hot. My heads spins like a leaf on a storm wind. Let me hold onto your wagon, Tony, quick, I'm shivering and I've got sharp needle head pains . . .

"Reeeeeee."

I'm running a temperature. I feel as if I have a torch hung flaming in my head.

Hotter. Pardon me for criticizing you, Tony, but I think its your popper turned up too high. Your face looks afraid, contorted, and your hands move so rapidly, why? Can't you shut it off? I'm hot. Everything melts. My knees sag.

Warmer still. He'd better turn that thing off, I can't take any more. I can't find my nickel anyhow. Please, snap it off, Tony, I'm sick. My uniform glows orange. I'll take fire!

Here, I'll turn it off for you, Tony.

You *hit* me!

Stop hitting me, stop clicking those knobs! It's hot, I tell you. Stop, or I'll—
Tony. Where are you? Gone.

Where did that purple flame shoot from? That loud blast, what was it? The flame seemed to stream from my hand, out of my scout flashlight. Purple flame—eating!

I smell a sharp bitter odor.

Like hamburger fried overlong.

I feel better now. Cool as winter. But—

Like a fly buzzing in my ears, a voice comes, faint, far off,

"Halloway, damn it, Halloway, where are you?"

Captain! It's his voice, sizzling. I don't see you, sir!

"Halloway, we're on the dead sea bottom near an ancient Martian city and—oh, never mind, dammit, if you hear me, press your boyscout badge and yell!"

I press the badge intensely, sweating. Hey, captain!

"Halloway! Glory. You're *not* dead. Where are you?"

I stopped for popcorn, sir. I can't see you. How do I hear you?

"It's an echo. Let it go. If you're okay, grab the next streetcar."

That's very opportune. Because here comes a big red streetcar now, around the corner of the drug store.

"What!"

Yes, sir, and its chock full of people. I'll climb aboard.

"Wait a minute! Hold on! Murder! What *kind* of people, dammit?"

It's the West Side gang. Sure. The whole bunch of tough kids.

"West side gang, hell, those are Martians, get the hell outa there! Transfer to another car—take the subway! Take the elevated!"

Too late. The car's stopped. I'll have to

get on. The conductor looks impatient.

"Impatient," he says. "You'll be mas-sacred!"

Oh, oh. Everybody's climbing from the streetcar, looking angry at me. Kelly and Grogan and Tompkins and the others. I guess there'll be a fight.

The captain's voice stabs my ears, but I don't see him anywhere:

"Use your r-gun, your blaster, your blaster. Hell, use your slingshot, or throw spitballs, or whatever the devil you imagine you got holstered there, but *use* it! Come on, men, about face and back!"

I'm outnumbered. I bet they'll gang me and give me the bumps, the bumps, the bumps. I bet they'll truss me to a maple tree, maple tree, maple tree and tickle me. I bet they'll ink-tattoo their initials on my forehead. Mother won't like this.

The captain's voice opens up louder, driving nearer:

"And Poppa ain't happy! Get outa there, Halloway!"

They're hitting me, sir! We're battling!

"Keep it up, Halloway!"

I knocked one down, sir, with an upper-cut. I'm knocking another down now. Here goes a third! Someone's grabbed my ankle. I'll kick him! *There!* I'm stumbling, falling! Lights in my eyes, purple ones, big purple lightning bolts sizzling the air!

Three of them vanished, just like that!

I think they fell down a manhole.

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt them bad.

They stole my flashlight.

"Get it back, Halloway! We're coming. Get your flash and use it!" That's silly.

"Silly," he says. "Silly. Silly."

I GOT my flashlight back, broken, no good. We're wrestling. There are so many of them, I'm weak. They're climbing all over me, hitting. It's not fair, I'm falling down, kicking, screaming!

"Up speed, men, full power!"

They're binding me up. I can't move. They're rushing me into the street-car now. Now I won't be able to go on that hike. And I planned on it so hard, too.

"Here we are, Halloway! Blast 'em, men! Oh, my Lord, look at the horrible faces on those creatures! *Guh!*"

Watch out, captain! They'll get you, too, and the others! *Ahh!* Somebody struck me

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on one of the men you've met in preceding issues—those cosmic-minded writers and artists who help to nourish PLANET STORIES and the Visigraph.

WORLD SWEEPER

Well, you asked for it . . .

My vital statistics are: Born March 4, 1913, and have been bothering folks ever since; married since 1934 to Lorraine, but how she puts up with me I'll probably never know; have four *very nice* children (but then I'm prejudiced). We call them the 4Js. Jacqueline, Jeraldine, James and Jon.

My life has been a full one, and I hope will continue to be so. My positions have been interesting, covering many fields. In the late twenties and early thirties I spent some time touring the country with "tent shows," called by the dignified title of Chataqua.

The winter of '33-'34 I spent touring the Orient with an orchestra playing spots in China, Japan, the Philippines and on shipboard. It was on this trip that I became interested in my hobby—the study of people and their philosophies.

For a time I taught school, but the low pay scale sent me back to my first love, the theatre. I now work as a projectionist and indulge in my hobby wherever I may find it. I particularly enjoy searching in dark corners where prejudice and tradition have been broken down. I enjoy reading the philosophies that dreamers put down in the form of fantasy. The world-sweeping ideas that would shock the populace if unveiled in any form other than fiction. I deplore the many trivial thoughts put down by mediocre writers with, frankly, nothing but nerve, and read by a gullible public because it's fashionable to read best sellers.

In spring of 1942 Lorraine and I decided to publish a "newsletter" to our friends in the services. It was this publication that brought us into contact with Science Fiction Fandom. We soon began doing Fantasy Fiction Field for Unger, contacted E. Everett Evans, president of the National Fantasy Fan Federation, and really began to learn how much a hobby can be enjoyed by sharing it with others.

Activities in fan clubs, publishing efforts, correspondence with friendly editors like Chet Whitehorn, letters from other fans have taught us that merely reading and enjoying Stf and Fantasy is not enough. We believe that we are now approaching the ultimate satisfaction of our hobby, fan life, by activity in the National Fantasy Fan Federation, a general group open to all fans; our local club, in similar fashion; Fantasy Amateur Press Association, in which each fan specializes in some field and gives to all the benefits of his work; and reading of the many amateur journals published by fans in the field. Such pleasure would not be possible for us were it not for the pro fields with such publications as our own PLANET STORIES.

WALTER DUNKELBERGER.

on the back of my head. Darkness. Dark. Dark.

Rockabye baby on the tree-top . . . when the wind blows . . .

"Okay, Holloway, *any* time. Just any old time you want to come to."

Dark. A voice talking. Dark as a whale's insides. Ouch, my head. I'm flat on my back, I can feel rocks under me.

"Good morning, *dear* Mr. Holloway."

That you, captain, over in that dark corner?

"It ain't the president of the United States!"

Where is this cave?

"Suppose *you* tell us, you got us into this mess with your eternally blasted popcorn! Why'd you get off the streetcar?"

Did the West Side gang truss us up like this, captain?

"West Side gang, *goh!* Those faces, those inhuman, weird, unsavory and horrible faces. All loose-fleshed and—gangrenous. Aliens, the whole rotting clutch of 'em."

What a funny way to talk.

"Listen, you parboiled idiot, in about an hour we're going to be fried, gutted, iced, killed, slaughtered, murdered, we will be, ipso facto, dead. Your 'friends' are whipping up a little blood-letting jamboree. Can't I shove it through your thick skull, we're on Mars, about to be sliced and hammered by a lousy bunch of Martians!"

"Captain, sir?"

"Yes, Berman?"

"The cave door is opening, sir. I think the Martians are ready to have at us again, sir. Some sort of test or other, no doubt."

"Let go a me, you one-eyed monster! I'm coming, don't push!"

We're outside the cave. They're cutting our bonds. See, captain, they aren't hurting us, after all. Here's the brick alley. There's Mrs. Haight's underwear waving on the clothes-line. See all the people from the beer hall—what're they waiting for?

"To see us die."

"Captain, what's wrong with Holloway, he's acting queer—"

"At least he's better off than us. He can't see these creatures' faces and bodies. It's enough to turn a man's stomach. This must be their amphitheatre. That looks like an obstacle course. I gather from their

sign lingo that if we make it through the obstacles, we're free. Footnote: nobody's ever gotten through alive yet. Seems they want you to go first, Berman. Good luck, boy."

"So long, captain. So long, Gus. So long, Holloway."

Berman's running down-alley with an easy, long-muscled stride. I hear him yelling high and clear, even though he's getting far away.

Here comes an automobile!

Berman! Ahh! It hit him! He's fallen!

Berman, get up, get up!

"Stay here, Holloway, it's not your turn yet."

My turn? What do you mean? Someone's gotta help Berman.

"Holloway, come back! Oh, man, I don't want to see this!"

LIFT up my legs, put them down, breathe out, breathe in, swing arms, swing legs, chew my tongue, blink my eyes, Berman, here I come, gee, things are crazy-funny, here comes an ice-wagon trundling along, its coming right at *me!* I can't see to get around it, it's coming so fast, I'll jump inside it, jump, jump, cool, ice, ice-pick, *chikk-chikk-chikk*, I hear the captain screaming off a million hot miles gone, *chikk-chikk-chikk* around the ice perimeter, the ice wagon is thundering, rioting, jouncing, shaking, rolling on big rusty iron wheels, smelling of sour ammonia, bouncing on a corduroy dirt and brick alley-road, the rear end of it seems to be snapping shut with many ice-prongs, I feel intense pain in my left leg, *chikk-chikk-chikk-chikk!* piece of ice, cold square, cold cube, a shuddering and convulsing, a temblor, the wagon wheels stop rolling, I jump down and run away from the wrecked wagon, did the wagon roll over Berman, I hope not, a fence here, I'll jump over it, another popcorn machine, very warm, very hot, all flame and red fire and burning metal knobs . . .

Oops, I didn't mean to strike the popcorn man down, hello, Berman, what're you doing in my arms, how'd you get here, did I pick you up, and why? an obstacle race at the high-school? you're heavy, I'm tired, dogs nipping at my heels, ~~how~~ far am I supposed to carry you? I hear the captain screaming me on, for why, for

why? here comes the big bad truant officer with a club in his hand to take me back to school, he looks mean and broad . . .

I kicked the truant officer's shins and kicked him in the face . . . Mama won't like that . . . yes, mommy . . . no mommy . . . that's unfair . . . that's not ethical fighting . . . something went squish . . . hmm . . . let's forget about it, shall we?

Breathing hard. Here comes the gang after me, all the rough, bristly Irishmen and scarred Norwegians and stubborn Italians . . . hit, kick, wrestle . . . here comes a swift car, fast, fast! I hope I can duck, with you, Berman . . . here comes another car from the opposite way! . . . if I work things right . . . uh . . . stop screaming, Berman!

The cars crashed into each other.

The cars still roll, tumbling, like two animals tearing at each other's throats.

Not far to go now, Berman, to the end of the alley. Just ahead. I'll sleep for forty years when this is over . . . where'd I get this flashlight in my hand? from one of those guys I knocked down? from the popcorn man? I'll poke it in front of me . . . people run away . . . maybe they don't like its light in their eyes . . . The end of the alley! There's the green valley and my house, and there's Mom and Pop waiting! Hey, let's sing, let's dance, we're going home!

"Halloway, you so-and-so, you did it!"

Dark. Sleep. Wake up slow. Listen.

"—and Halloway ran down that amphitheatre nonchalant as a high-school kid jumping hurdles. A big saffron Martian beast with a mouth so damn big it looked like the rear end of a delivery truck, lunged forward square at Halloway—"

"What'd Halloway do?"

"Halloway jumped right inside the monster's mouth—right inside!"

"What happened then?"

"The animal looked dumbfounded. It tried to spit out. Then, to top it all, what did Halloway do, I ask you, I ask you, what did he do? He drew forth his boy-scout blade and went *chikk-chikk-chikk* all around the bloody interior, pretending like he's holed up in an ice-wagon, chipping himself off pieces of ice."

"No?"

"On my honor! The monster, after tak-

ing a bit of this *chikk-chikk-chikk* business, leaped around, cavorting, floundering, rocking, tossing, and then, with a spout of blood, out popped Halloway, grinning like a kid, and on he ran, dodging spears and pretending they were pebbles, leaping a line of crouched warriors and saying they're a picket fence. Then he lifted Berman and trotted with him until he met a three hundred pound Martian wrestler. Halloway supposed that it was the truant officer and promptly kicked him in the face. Then he knocked down another guy working furiously at the buttons of a paralysis machine which looked, to Halloway, like a pop-corn wagon! After which two gigantic black Martian leopards attacked, resembling to him nothing more than two very bad drivers in dark automobiles. Halloway sidestepped. The two 'cars' crashed and tore each other apart, fighting. Halloway pumped on, shooting people with his 'flashlight' which he retrieved from the 'popcorn' man. Pointing the flash at people, he was amazed when they vanished and—oh, oh, Halloway's waking up, I saw his eyelids flicker. Quiet, everyone. Halloway, you awake?"

Yeah. I been listening to you talk for five minutes. I still don't understand. Nothing happened at all. How long I been asleep?

"Two days. Nothing happened, eh? Nothing, except you got the Martians kowtowing, that's all, brother. You're spectacular performance impressed people. The enemy suddenly decided that if *one* earthman could do what you did, what would happen if a million more came?"

Everybody keeps on with this joking, this lying about Mars. Stop it. Where am I?

"Aboard the rocket, about to take off."

Leave Earth? No, no, I don't want to leave Earth, good green Earth! Let go! I'm afraid! Let go of me! Stop the ship!

"Halloway, *this* is Mars—we're going back to Earth."

Liars, all of you! I don't want to go to Mars, I want to stay here, on Earth!

"Holy cow, here we go again. Hold him down, Gus. Hey, doctor, on the double! Come help Halloway change his mind back, will ya!"

Liars! You can't do this! Liars! Liars!

WHAT HATH ME?

By HENRY KUTTNER

The thousand tiny eyes raced past him, glittering with alien ecstasy, shining brighter, ever brighter as they fed. He felt the lifeblood being sucked out of him—deeper stabbed the gelid cold—louder roared the throbbing in his ears . . . then the voice came, "The heart of the Watcher. Crush the heart."

Illustrated by HOLLINGSWORTH

THE man running through the forest gloom breathed in hot, panting gusts, pain tearing at his chest. Underfoot the crawling, pale network of tree-trunks lay flat upon the ground, and more than once he tripped over a slippery bole and crashed down, but he was up again instantly.

He had no breath to scream. He sobbed as he ran, his burning eyes trying to pierce the shadows. Whispers rustled down from above. When the leaf-ceiling parted, a blaze of terribly bright stars flamed in the jet sky. It was cold and dark, and the man knew that he was not on Earth.

They were following him, even here.

A squat yellow figure, huge-eyed, inhuman, loomed in his path—one of the swamp people of Southern Venus. The man swung a wild blow at the thing, and his fist found nothing. It had vanished. But beyond it rose a single-legged giant, a Martian, bellowing the great, gusty laughter of the Redland Tribes. The man dodged, stumbled, and smashed down heavily. He heard paddling footsteps and tried, with horrible intensity of purpose, to rise. He could not.

The Martian crept toward him—but it was no longer a Martian. An Earthman, with the face of some obscene devil, came forward with a sidling, slow motion. Horns sprouted from the low forehead. The teeth were fangs. As the creature came nearer, it raised its hands—twisted, gnarled talons—and slid them about the man's throat.

Through the forest thundered the deep, booming clangor a brass gong. The sound shattered the phantom as a hammer shatters glass. Instantly the man was alone.

Making hoarse, animal sounds in his

throat, he staggered upright and lurched in the direction from which the sound came. But he was too weak. Presently he fell, and this time he did not rise. His arms moved a little and then were still. He slept, lines of tortured weariness twisting the haggard face.

Very faintly, from infinite distances, he heard a voice . . . two voices. Inhuman. Alien—and yet with a warmth of vital urgency that stirred something deep within him.

"He has passed our testing."

Then a stronger, more powerful voice—answering.

"Others have passed our testing—but the Aesir slew them."

"There is no other way. In this man I sensed something—a little different. He can hate—he has hated."

"He will need more than hatred—" the deeper voice said. "Even with us to aid him. And there is little time. Strip his memories from him now, so that he may not be weakened by them—"

"May the gods fight with him."

"But he fights the gods. The only gods men know in these evil days—"

The man awakened.

Triphammers beat ringingly inside his skull. He opened his eyes and closed them quickly against the sullen red glow that beat down from above. He lay motionless, gathering his strength.

What had happened?

He didn't know. The jolting impact of that realization struck him violently. He felt a brief panic of disorientation. Where—?

I'm Derek Stuart, he thought. At least it isn't complete amnesia. I know who I am. But not where I am.



This time when he opened his eyes they stayed open. Overhead a broad-leafed tree arched. Through its branches he could see a dark, starry sky, the glowing, ringed disc of Saturn very far away, and a deeply scarlet glow.

Not Earth, then. A Saturnian moon? No, Saturn didn't eclipse most of the sky. Perhaps the asteroid belt.

He moved his head a little, and saw the red moon.

Aesir!

The message rippled along his nerves into his brain. Stuart reacted instantly. His hard, strong body writhed, whipped over, and then he was in a half-crouch, one hand flashing to his belt while his eyes searched the empty silence of the forest around him. There was no sound, no movement.

SWEAT stood on Stuart's forehead, and he brushed it away impatiently. His deeply-tanned face set into harsh lines of curiously hopeless desperation. There was no blaster gun at his belt; that didn't matter. Guns couldn't help him now—on Asgard.

The red moon had told him the answer. Only one world in the System had a red moon, and men didn't go to that artificial asteroid willingly. They went, yes—but only to be doomed and damned. From Venus to Callisto spacemen spoke of Asgard in hushed voices—Asgard where the Aesir lived and ruled the worlds of Man.

No spaceships left Asgard, except the sleek black cruisers manned by the priests of Aesir. *No man had ever returned from Asgard.*

Stuart grinned mirthlessly. He'd learned a lesson, though he'd never profit by it now. Always before he'd been confident of his ability to outdrink anyone of his own weight and size. And certainly that slight, tired-eyed man at the Singing Star, in New Boston, should have passed out long before Stuart—under normal circumstances.

So the circumstances hadn't been quite normal. It was a frame. A beautiful, air-tight frame, because he'd never come back to squawk. Nobody came back from Asgard.

He shivered a little and looked up warily. There were legends, of course. The Watchers who patrolled the asteroid cease-

lessly—robots, men said. They served the Aesir. As, in a way, all men served the Aesir.

No sound. No movement. Only the sullen crimson light beating down ominously from that dark sky.

Stuart took stock of his clothing. Regular leatheroid spaceman's rig; they'd left him that, anyway. Whoever *they* were. He couldn't remember anything that had happened after the fifth drink with the tired-eyed man. There was a very faint recollection of running somewhere—seeing unpleasant things—and hearing two oddly unreal voices. But the memories slipped away and vanished as he tried to focus on them.

The hell with it. He was an Asgard. And that meant—something rather more unpleasant than death, if the legends were to be believed. A very suitable climax to an unorthodox life, in this era when obedience and law enforcement were the rigid rule.

Stuart picked up a heavy branch that might serve as a club. Then, shrugging, he turned westward, striking at random through the forest. No use waiting here till the Watchers came. At least—he could fight, as he had always fought as far back as he could remember.

There wasn't much room for fighters any more. Not under the Aesir rule. There were nations and kings and presidents, of course, but they were puppet figures, never daring to disobey any edicts that came from the mystery-shrouded asteroid hanging off the orbit of Mars, the tiny, artificial world that had ruled the System for a thousand years.

The Aesir. The inhuman, cryptic beings who—if legend were true—once had been human. Stuart scowled, trying to remember.

An—an entropic accelerator, that was it. A device, a method that speeded up evolution tremendously. That had been the start of the tyranny. A machine that could accelerate a man's evolution by a million years—

Some had used that method. Those were the ones who had become the Aesir, creatures so far advanced in the evolutionary scale that they were no longer remotely human. Much was lost in the mists of the past. But Stuart could recall that

much—the knowledge that the Aesir had once been human, that they were human no longer, and that for a thousand years they had ruled the System, very terribly, from their forbidden asteroid that they named Asgard—home of the legendary Norse gods.

Maybe the tired-eyed man had been an Aesir priest, collecting victims. Certainly no others would have dared to land a ship on Asgard. Stuart, swung on, searching the empty skies, and now a queer, unreasoning excitement began to grow within him. At least, before he died, he'd learn what the Aesir were like. It probably wouldn't be pleasant knowledge, but there'd be some satisfaction in it. And there'd be even more satisfaction if he thought he had a chance of smashing a hard fist into the face of one of the Aesir priests—or even—

Hell, why not? He had nothing to lose now. From the moment he had touched Asgard soil, he was damned anyway. But of one thing Stuart was certain; he wouldn't be led like a helpless sheep to the throat-cutting. He wouldn't die without fighting against them.

The forest thinned before him. There was a flicker of swift motion far ahead. Stuart froze, his grip tightening on the cudgel, his eyes searching.

Between the columnar trees, bright amid the purple shadows, a glitter of sparkling nebulae swept. A web of light, Stuart thought—so dazzling his eyes ached as he stared at the—the thing.

Bodiless, intangible, the shifting net of stars poised, high above his head. Hundreds of twinkling, glittering pinpoints flickered there, so swiftly it seemed as though an arabesque spider-web of light weaved in the still, dark air—web of the Norns!

Each flickering star-fleck—watched. Each was an eye.

And as the thing poised, a horrible, half-human hesitancy in its stillness, a deep, humming note sounded, from its starry heart.

Star-points shook and quivered to the sound. Again it came—deeper, more menacing.

Questioning!

Was this one of the—Watchers? Was this one of them?

ABRUPTLY its hesitancy vanished; it swept down upon Stuart. Instinctively he swung his cudgel in a smashing blow that sent him reeling forward—for there was no resistance. The star-creature was as intangible as air.

And yet it was not. The dazzling web of light enfolded him like a blazing cloak. Instantly a cold, trembling horror crawled along his skin. Bodiless the thing might be—but it was dangerous, infinitely so!

Pressure, shifting, quicksand pressure, was all about him. That stealthy cold crept into his flesh and bones, frigid icicles jabbing into his brain. Gasping with shock, Stuart struck out. He had dropped the club. Now he stooped and groped for it, but he could see nothing except a glittering veil of diamonds that raced like a mad torrent everywhere.

The humming rose again—ominously triumphant.

Cursing, Stuart staggered forward. The star-cloak stayed. He tried to grip it somewhere, to wrench it free, but he could not. The thousands of tiny eyes raced past him, glittering with alien ecstasy, shining brighter and ever brighter as they fed.

He felt the life being sucked out of him. . . . Deeper stabbed the gelid cold . . . louder roared that throbbing tone in his ears.

He heard his voice gasping furious, hopeless oaths. His eyes ached with the strain of staring at that blinding glitter. Then—

The heart of the Watcher. Crush the heart!

The words crashed like deep thunder in his brain. Had someone spoken them—? No . . . for, with the command, had come a message as well. As though a thought had spoken within his mind, a telepathic warning from—where?

His eyes strained at the dazzle. Now he saw that there was a brighter core that did not shift and change when the rest of the star-cloud wove its dreadful net. A spot of light that—

He reached out . . . the nucleus darted away . . . he lurched forward, on legs half-frozen, and felt a stone turn under his foot. As he crashed down, his hand closed and tightened on something warm and living that pulsed frantically against his palm.

The humming rose to a shrill scream . . . frightened . . . warning.

Stuart tightened his grip. He lay motionless, his eyes closed. But all around him he could feel the icy tendrils of the star-thing lashing at him, drinking his human warmth, probing with avid fingers at his brain.

He felt that warm—core—writhe and try to slip between his fingers. He squeezed . . .

The scream burst out, an inhuman agony in its raw-edged keening.

It stopped.

In Stuart's hand was—nothing.

He opened his eyes. The dazzling glitter of star-points had vanished. Only the forest, with its purple shadows, lay empty and silent around him.

Stuart got up slowly, swallowed dry-throated. The creatures of the Aesir were not invulnerable, then. Not to one who knew their weaknesses.

How had he known?

What voice had spoken in his brain? There had been an odd, impossible familiarity to that—that mental voice, now that he remembered it. Somewhere he had heard it, sensed it before.

That gap in his memory—

He tried to bridge it, but he could not. There was only a quickening of the desire to go on westward. He felt suddenly certain that he would find the Aesir in that direction.

He took a hesitant step—and another. And with each step, a queer, unmotivated confidence poured into him. As though some barrier in his mind had broken down, letting some strange flood of proud defiance rush in.

It was impossible. It was dangerous. But—certainly—no more dangerous than supinely waiting here on Asgard till another Watcher came to destroy him. There were worse things than the starry Watchers here, if legends were to be trusted.

He went on, the curious tide of defiance rising higher and ever higher in his blood. It was a strangely intoxicating sense of—of pure, crazy self-confidence such as no man should rightfully have felt on this haunted asteroid.

He wondered—but the drunkenness was such that he did not wonder much. He did not question.

He thought: *To hell with the Aesir!*

The forest ended. At his feet a road began, leading off into the purple horizons of the flat plain before him. At the end of that road was a thrusting pillar of light that rose like a tower toward the dark sky.

There were the Aesir. . . .

II

EVERY spaceman has an automatic sense of orientation. In ancient days, when clipper ships sailed the seas of Earth, the Yankee skippers knew the decks beneath their feet, and they knew the stars. Southern Cross or Pole Star told them in what latitudes they sailed. In unknown waters, they still had their familiar keels and the familiar stars.

So it is with the spacemen who drift from Pluto to Mercury Darkside, trusting to metal hulls that shut in the air and shut out the vast abysses of interplanetary space. When they work outship, a glance at the sky will tell a trained man where he is—and only tough, trained men survive the dangerous commerce of space. On Mercury the blazing solar corona flames above the horizon; on clouded Venus the green star of Earth shines sometimes. On Io, Callisto, Ganymede, a man can orient himself by the gigantic mother planet—Saturn or Jupiter—and in the Asteroid Belt, there is always the strange procession of little worlds like lanterns, some half-shadowed, others brightly reflecting the Sun's glare. Anywhere in the System the sky is friendly—

Except on Asgard. Jupiter was too far and too small; Mars was scarcely visible; the Asteroid Belt not much thicker than the Milky Way. The unfamiliar magnitudes of the planets told Stuart, very surely, that he was on unknown territory. He was without the sure, safe anchor that spacemen depend upon, and that lack told him how utterly he stood alone now.

But the unreasoning confidence did not flag. If anything, it mounted stronger within him as he hurried along the road, his rangy legs eating up the miles with easy speed. The sooner he reached his goal, the better he'd like it. Nor did he wish to encounter any more of the Aesir's guardians—his business was with the Aesir!

The tower of light grew taller as he went on. Now he saw that it was a cluster

of buildings, massed cylinders of varying heights, each one gigantic in diameter as well as height, and all shining with that cold, shadowless radiance that apparently came from the stone—or metal—itself. The road led directly to the base of the tallest tower.

It ran between shining pillars—a gateless threshold—and was lost in silvery mists. No bars were needed to keep visitors out of this fortress!

Briefly a cool wind of doubt blew upon Stuart. He hesitated, wishing he had at least his blaster gun. But he was unarmed; he had even left the club back in the forest.

He glanced around.

The red moon was sinking. A heavier darkness was creeping over the land. Very far away he thought he saw the shifting flicker of dancing lights—a Watcher?

He hurried onward.

Cyclopean, the tower loomed above him, like a shining rod poised to strike. His gaze could not pierce the mists beyond the portal.

He stepped forward—between the twin pillars. He walked on blindly into the silver mists.

Twenty steps he took—and paused, as something dark and shapeless swam into view before him. A pit—at his feet.

In the dimness he could not see its bottom, but a narrow bridge crossed the gulf, a little to his left. Stuart crossed the bridge. Solidity was again under his feet.

With shocking suddenness, a great, brazen bellow of laughter roared out. Harsh mockery sharpened it. And it was echoed.

All around Stuart the laughter thundered—and was answered. The walls gave it back and echoed it. The bellowing laughter of gods deafened Stuart.

The mists drifted away—were sucked down into the pit. They vanished.

As though they fled from that evil laughter.

Stuart stood in a chamber that must have occupied the entire base of that enormous tower. Behind him the abyss gaped. Before him a shifting veil of light hid whatever lay behind it. But all around, between monstrous pillars, were set thrones, ebony thrones fifty feet tall.

On the thrones sat giants!

Titan figures, armored in glittering mail, ringed Stuart, and instantly his mind fled back to half-forgotten folk-lore. . . . Asgard, Jotunheim, the lands of the giants and the gods. Thor and Odin, sly Loki and Baldur—they were all here, he thought, bearded colossi roaring their black laughter into the shaking air of the hall.

Watching him from their height—

Then he looked up, and the giants were dwarfed.

The chamber was roofless. At least he could see no roof. The pillars climbed up and up tremendously all around the walls that were hung with vast stretches of tapestry, till they dwindled to a pinpoint far above. The sheer magnitude of the tower made Stuart's mind rock dizzily.

Still the laughter roared out. But now it died. . . .

Thundered through the hall a voice . . . deep . . . resonant . . . the voice of the Aesir.

"A human, brother!"

"Aye! A human—and a mad one, to come here."

"To enter the hall of the Aesir."

A red-bearded colossus bent down, his glacial blue eyes staring at Stuart. *"Shall I crush him?"*

STUART sprang back as an immense hand swooped down like a falling tree upon him. Instinctively his hand flashed to his belt, and suddenly the red-beard was shouting laughter that the others echoed.

"He has courage."

"Let him live."

"Aye. Let him live. He may amuse us for a while. . . ."

"And then?"

"Then the pit—with the others."

The others? Stuart slanted a glance downward. The silver mists had dissipated now, and he could see that the abyss was not bottomless. Its floor was fifty feet below the surface on which he stood, and a dozen figures were visible beneath.

They stood motionless—like statues. A burly, leather-clad Earthman who might have been whisked from some Plutonian mine; a slim, scantily clad Earthgirl, her hair powered blue, her costume the shining sequin-suit of a tavern entertainer. A stocky, hunch-shouldered Venusian with his slate-gray skin; a Martian girl, seven

feet tall, with limbs and features of curious delicacy, her hair piled high atop that narrow skull. Another Earthman—a thin, pale, clerklike fellow. A white-skinned, handsome Callistan native, looking like Apollo, and, like all Callistans, harboring the cold savagery of a demon behind that smooth mask.

A dozen of them—drawn from all parts of the System. Stuart remembered that this was the time of the periodic tithing—which meant nothing less than a sacrifice. Once each month a few men and women would vanish—not many—and the black ships of the Aesir priests sped back to Asgard with their captives.

Not one looked up. Frozen motionless as stone, they stood there in the pit—waiting.

Again the laughter crashed out. The redbeard was watching Stuart.

"His courage flags," the great voice boomed. "Speak the truth, Earthman. Have you courage to face the gods?"

Stuart stubbornly refused to answer. He had an odd, reasonless impression that this was part of some deep game, that behind the mocking by-play lay a more serious purpose.

"He has courage now," a giant said. "But did he always have courage? Has there never been a time in his life when courage failed him? Answer, Earthman!"

Stuart was listening to another voice, a quiet, infinitely distant voice within his brain that whispered: *Do not answer them!*

"Let him pass our testing," the redbeard commanded. "If he fails, there is an end. If he does *not* fail—he goes into the pit to walk the Long Orbit."

The giant leaned forward.

"Will you match skill—and courage—with us, Earthling?"

Still Stuart did not answer. More than ever now he sensed the violent, hidden undercurrents surging beneath the surface of this byplay. More than he knew swung in the balance here.

He nodded.

"He has courage," a giant repeated. "But did he always have courage?"

"We shall see . . ." the redbeard said.

The air shimmered before Stuart. Through its shaking his senses played him false. He knew quite well who he was and where he stood, in what deadly peril

—but in that shimmer which bewildered the eyes and the mind he was a boy again, seeing a certain hillside he had not seen except through his boyhood's eyes. And he saw a black horse standing above him on the slope, pawing the ground and looking at him with red eyes. And an old, old terror came flooding over him that he had not remembered for a quarter of a century. A boy's acute and sudden terror. . . .

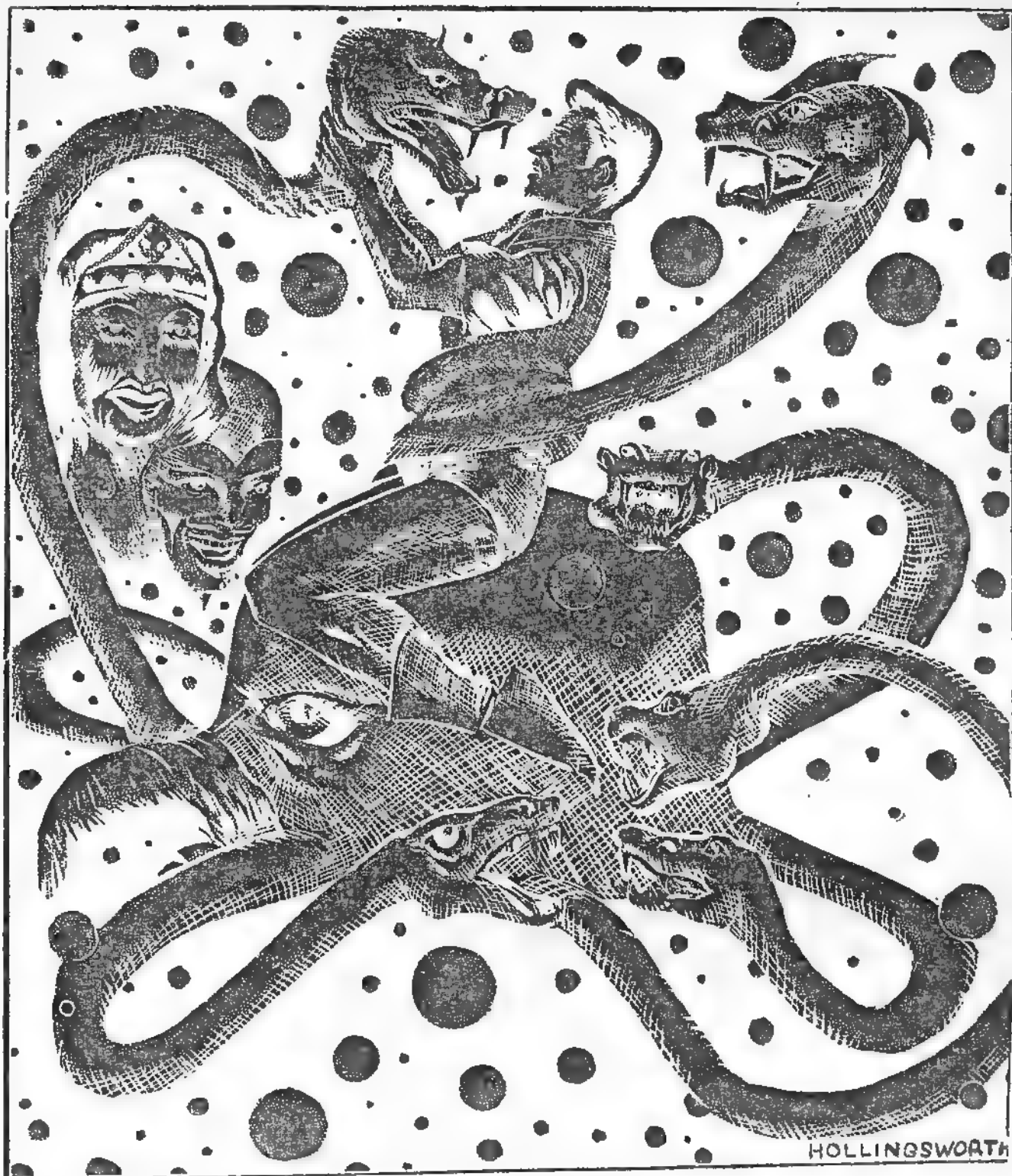
Who had opened the doors of his mind and laid this secret bare? He himself had long forgotten—and who upon this alien world could look back through space and time to remind him of that long-ago day when the vicious black horse had thrown an inexperienced boy rider and planted a seed of terror in his mind which he had been years outgrowing? But the fear was long gone now, long gone. . . . *Was it?*

Then whence had come this monstrous black stallion that pawed the floor of the hall, glaring down red-eyed at him and showing teeth like fangs? No horse, but a monster in the shape of a horse, a monster ten feet high at the shoulder, wearing the shape of his boyhood nightmare that woke in Stuart even now the old, unreasoning horror. . . .

It was stamping down upon him, shaking its bridled head, snorting, lifting its lip above the impossible teeth. He saw the reins hanging loose, he saw the saddle and the swinging stirrups. He knew that the only safety in this hall for him was paradoxically upon the nightmare's back, where the hoofs and fangs could not reach him. But the terror and revulsion which the boy had buried long ago came welling up from founts deep-buried in the man's subconscious mind. . . .

NOW it was rushing him, head like a snake's outthrust, hissing like a snake, reins flying like Medusa-locks as it stretched to seize him. For one instant he stood there paralyzed. He had faced dangers on many worlds to which this nightmare was nothing, but he had never since boyhood felt the paralysis of horror that gripped him now. It was a child's horror, resurrected from the caves of sleep to ruin him. . . .

With a superhuman effort he broke that frozen fear, snatching for the flying reins,



whirling as the monstrous thing swept past him in a thunder of terrifying hoofs. Desperately he clung to the reins, and as the thing rushed by he somehow got a clutching hand upon the saddle-horn and found a stirrup that swung sickeningly when it took his weight.

Then he was in the saddle, dizzy still with the terrors of childhood, but astride the nightmare.

And now, with a sudden intoxicating clarity, the fear fell from his mind. For an instant he sat high on the back of the incredible fanged thing, an old, old terror clearing from his mind. Confidence which was, he knew, his own and no bodiless reassurance drawn from dreams, such as

he had felt in the jungle, flooded warmly through him. He was not afraid any more—he would never be afraid. The festering terror buried deep in his childhood had come to light at last and was wiped away. He caught the reins tight and flashed a sudden grin around the hall—

Brazen laughter boomed through the building. And beneath his knees Stuart felt the horse's body alter incredibly. One moment he was gripping a solid, warm-fleshed, hairy thing whose body had a familiar pitch and motion beneath the saddle. Then, then—

Indescribably the body *writhed* under him. The warm hairy flesh flowed and changed. Cold struck through leatheroid

against his thighs, and it was a smooth, pouring cold of many alien muscles working powerfully together in a way no mammal knows. He looked down.

He was riding a monstrous snake that twisted its head to look at him in the moment he realized what had happened. Its great diamond-shaped head towered high and came looping down toward him, wide-mouthed, tongue like a flame flickering. . . .

It laid its cold, smooth cheek against his with a hideous caressing motion, sliding around his neck, sliding down his arm and side, laying a loop of cold, scaly strength around him and pressing, pressing. . . .

His hands closed around the thickness of its throat, futilely—and the throat melted in his grasp and was hairly with a hairiness no mammal ever knew. The motion of the body he bestrode changed again and was incredibly springy and light.

He rode a monstrous spider. His hands were sunk wrist-deep in loathsome coarse hair, and his eyes stared into great cold faceted eyes that mirrored his own face a thousandfold. He saw his own distorted features looking back at him in countless miniatures, but behind the faces, in the great eyes of the spider, he saw no consciousness regarding him. The cold multiple eyes were not aware of Derek Stuart. Behind the shield of its terrible face the spider shut away its own arachnid thoughts and the memories of the red fields of Mars that were its home. With dreadful, impersonal aloofness its mandibles gaped forward toward its prey.

Loathing ran in waves of weakness through Stuart's whole body, but he shut his eyes and blindly struck out at the nearer of those great mirroring eyes, feeling wetness shatter against his fist as—as—

As the horror shifted and vanished, while rippling waves of green light darkened all about him. Now they coagulated, drew together into a meadow, cool with Earthly grass, bordered by familiar trees far away. Primroses gleamed here and there. Above him was the blue sky and the warm bright sun that shone only upon the hills of Earth.

But what he felt was horror.

Twenty feet from him was a rank, rounded patch of weeds. His gaze was drawn inexorably to that spot. And it was from

there that the crawling dread reached out to him.

Faintly he heard laughter . . . of the gods . . . of the Aesir. The Aesir? Who—what were they? How had he, Derek Stuart, ever heard of them except as a name whispered in fear as the spaceships streaked through the clouds above that Dakota farmstead. . . .

Derek Stuart . . . a boy of eleven. . . .

But—but—that was wrong, somehow. He wasn't a child any more. He had matured, become a spaceman—

Dreams. The dreams of an eleven-year-old.

Yet the hollow, dreadful laughter throbbed somewhere, in the vaults of the blue overhead, in the solidity of the very ground beneath him.

This had happened before. It had happened to a boy in South Dakota—a boy who had not known what lay concealed in that verdant clump of weeds.

But now, somehow—and very strangely—Stuart knew what he would find there.

He was afraid. Horribly, sickeningly afraid. Cold nausea crawled up his spine and the calves of his legs. He wanted to turn and run to the farmhouse half a mile away. He almost turned, and then paused as the distant laughter grew louder.

They wanted him to run. They were trying to scare him—and, once the defenses of his courage had broken, he would be lost. Stuart knew that with an icy certainty.

Somewhere, very far away, he sensed a man standing in a cyclopean hall—a man in ragged spaceman's garb, hard-faced, thin-lipped, angry-eyed. A familiar figure. The man was urging him on—telling him to go on toward that clump of weeds—

Derek Stuart obeyed the voiceless command. His throat dry, his heart pumping, he forced himself across the meadow till he stood at his goal and looked down at the bloody, twisted corpse of the tramp who had been knifed by another hobo, twenty years before, on that Dakota farm. The old nausea of shocked horror took him by the throat and strangled him.

He fought it down. This time he didn't run screaming back to the farmhouse. . . .

And suddenly the laughter of the gods was stilled. Derek Stuart, a man once more in mind, stood again in the tower of the

Aesir. The thrones between the monstrous pillars were vacant.

The Aesir were gone.

III

STUART let out his breath in a long sigh. He had no illusions about the vanishment of the Aesir; he knew he had not conquered those mighty beings. It would take more than human powers to do that. But at least he had a respite. All but the most stolid spacemen develop hypertension, and there seems to be a curious mathematical rule about that; it increases according to the distance from the Sun. Which may be explained by the fact that environmental differences also increase as the outer planets are reached—and alien environments breed alien creatures. A great many men have gone insane on Pluto. . . .

This was not Pluto; it was nearer Sunward than Jupiter, but the utter alienage that brooded over Asgard was almost palpable. Even the solidity under Stuart's feet, the very stones of the planetoid, were artificially created, by a science a million years beyond that of his own time. And the Aesir—

Unexpectedly his deep chest shook with laughter. The inexplicable self-confidence that had first come to him in the Asgard forests had not waned; it seemed to have grown even stronger since his meeting with the Aesir giants. Now he stared around the colossal hall, his eyes straining toward the spot of light far above where those incredible columns converged. His own insignificance by comparison did not trouble him.

Whether or not he could have the slightest hope of winning this game—at least he was giving his enemies a run for their money!

A sound from the pit roused him. Stuart walked warily toward the edge. The dozen motionless figures were still there, fifty feet below, and among them was one he had not noticed before—an Earthgirl, he thought, with curling dark hair framing a white face as she tilted up her chin and stared at him.

At this distance he could make out few details; she wore a close-fitting green suit which left slender arms and legs bare.

"Earthman—" she said, in a clear, carry-

ing voice. "Earthman! Quick! The Aesir will be back—go now! Leave their temple before they—"

"Don't waste your breath," Stuart said. "This is Asgard." Whoever the girl was, she should know the impossibility of leaving the taboo world. "If I can find a rope—"

She said quickly, "You won't find one. Not here, in the temple."

"How can I get you out of there? And the others?"

"You're mad," the girl said. "What good would it do. . . ." She shook her head. "Better to die at once."

Stuart narrowed his eyes at the dozen frozen figures. "I don't think so. Fourteen of us can put up a better fight than one. If your friends wake up—"

The girl said, "On your left, between the pillars, there's a tapestry showing Perseus and the Gorgon. Touch the helm of Perseus and the hand of Andromeda. Then go carefully—there may be traps."

"What is it?"

"It will lead you down here. You can free us. If you hurry—oh, but it's hopeless! The Aesir—"

"Damn the Aesir," Stuart snarled. "Wake up the others!" He whirled and ran toward the distant wall, where he could see the Perseus tapestry, brown and gold, a huge curtain between two columns.

If the Aesir saw, they made no move. . . .

Stuart's lips twisted in a bitter smile. The crazy confidence had not left him, but he was conscious of a reassuring warmth; at least he was no longer completely alone. That would help. Between the worlds, and on the desolate planets that swing along the edge of the System, loneliness is the lurking terror, more horrible than the most exotic monster ever spawned by the radioactive Plutonian earth.

He touched the tapestry twice; it swept away from him, and a staircase was visible, leading down through stone or metal—he could not tell which. Stuart fought back the impulse that urged him to race down those curving spiral steps. The girl had spoken of traps.

He went warily, testing each tread before he put his weight upon it. Though he did not think that the snares of the Aesir would be so simple.

At the bottom, he emerged into a vaulted

chamber, tiny by comparison with the one he had left. It was oval, domed ceiling and walls and floor shining with a milky radiance—except at one spot.

There he saw a door—transparent. Through it he looked into the pit. He was on a level with the floor of that shaft now; he could see the dozen figures still standing motionless in a huddled group, and a few feet beyond the glassy pane was the Earthgirl. She was looking directly at him, but her dark eyes had a blind seeking, as though the door was opaque from her side.

Stuart paused, his hand on the complicated mechanism that, he guessed, would open the portal. His hard, dark face was impassive, but he was conscious of an unfamiliar stirring deep within him. From above, he had not seen the girl's beauty.

He saw it now.

SHE couldn't be an Earthgirl—entirely. She must be one of those disturbingly lovely interplanetary halfbreeds. Earthblood she had, of course, and predominantly, but there was something more, the pure essence of beauty that blazed through her like a flame kindled in a lamp of crystal. In all his wanderings between the worlds, Stuart had never seen a girl as breathtakingly lovely as this one.

His hand moved on the controls: the door slid silently open. The girl's eyes brightened. She gave a little gasp and ran toward him. Without question she sought refuge in his arms, and for a moment Stuart held her—not unwillingly.

He thrust her away gently.

"The others."

She said, "It's useless. The paralysis—"

Stuart scowled and stepped across the threshold into the pit. Uneasiness crawled along his spine as he did so. The Aesir might be watching from above, or—or—

There was nothing. Only dead silence, and the uneven breathing of the girl as she stood in the doorway watching. Stuart stopped before the leather-clad Earthman and tested a burly arm. The man stood frozen, his flesh cold and hard as stone, his eyes staring glassily. He was not even breathing.

So with the others. Stuart grimaced and shrugged. He turned back toward the girl, and felt a pulse of relief as he

stepped into the shining chamber. He might be no safer here, but at least he wasn't so conscious of inhuman eyes that might be watching from above. Not that solid stone might be any barrier to the Aesir's probing gaze. . . .

The girl touched the mechanism; the door slid silently shut. "It's no use," she said. "The paralysis holds all the others. Only I could battle it—a little. And that was because—"

"Save it," Stuart said. He turned toward the door by which he had entered, but an urgent hand gripped his wrist.

"Let me talk," the quiet voice said. "We're as safe here as anywhere. And there may be a way—now that I can think clearly again."

"A way out? A safe way?"

There was a haunted look in her dark eyes. "I don't know. I've lived here for a long time. The others—" she pointed toward the door of the pit. "The sacrifices were brought to Asgard only yesterday. But I've been here many moons. The Aesir kept me alive for a bit, to amuse them. Then they tired, and I was thrown in with the others. But I learned a little. I—I—no one can dwell here in the Aesir stronghold without—changing a little. That's why the paralysis didn't hold me as long as it holds the others."

"Can we save them?"

"I don't know," she said, with a small, helpless shrug. "I don't even know if we can save ourselves. It's been so long since I was brought to Asgard that I—I scarcely remember my life before that. But I have learned a little of the Aesir—and that may help us now."

Stuart watched her. She tried to smile, but not successfully.

She said, "I'm Kari. The rest—I've forgotten. You're—"

"Derek Stuart."

"Tell me what happened."

"We haven't time," Stuart said impatiently, but Kari shook her head.

"We'll need weapons, and I must know—first—if you can use them. Tell me!"

Well, she was right. She had knowledge that Stuart needed. So he told her, very briefly, what he remembered.

She stared at him. "Voices—in your mind?"

"Something like that. I don't know—"

"No. No. Or—wait—" He tried to focus his thoughts upon a far, faint calling that came from infinite distances. His name. An urgent summons—

It faded and was gone.

"There's nothing," Stuart said finally, and Kari moved her shoulders uneasily.

"No help there, then."

"Tell me one thing. What's the Aesir's power? Hypnotism?"

"No," Kari said, "or not entirely. They can make thoughts into real things. They are—what the race of man will evolve into in a million years. And they have changed, into beings utterly alien to humans."

"They looked human—giants, though."

"They can assume any shape," Kari told him. "Their real form is unimaginable. Being of pure energy . . . mental force . . . matrixes of electronic power. They were striking at you through your mind."

Stuart said, "I wondered why they didn't set some of their Watchers on me."

"I don't know why they didn't," Kari frowned. "Instead, they hammered at your weaknesses—old fears that hung on to you for years. Experiences that frightened you in the past. They sent your mind back into that past—but you were too strong for them."

"Too strong—?"

"Then. They have other powers, Stuart—incredible powers. You can't fight them alone. And you *must* fight them. In a thousand years no one has dared—"

Stuart remembered something. "Two dared—once."

KARI nodded. "I know. I know the legends, anyway. About John Starr and Lorna. The great rebels who first defied the Aesir when the tyranny began. But they may have been only legendary figures. Even if they were real—they failed."

"Yes, they failed. And they're a thousand years dead. But it shows something—to me at least. Man wasn't meant to be a slave to these monsters. Rebellion—"

Kari watched him. Stuart's eyes were shadowed.

"John Starr and Lorna," he whispered. "I wonder what their world was like, a thousand years ago? We've got all the

worlds now, all the planets of the System from Jupiter to the smallest asteroid. But we don't rule them, as men owned their own Earth in those days. We're slaves to the Aesir."

"The Aesir are—are gods."

"John Starr didn't think so," Stuart said. "Neither do I. And at worst I can always die, as he did. Listen, Kari." He gripped her arms. "Think. You've lived here for a while. Is there any weapon against those devils?"

She met his gaze steadily. "Yes," she said. "But—"

"What is it? Where?"

Abruptly Kari's face changed. She pressed herself against Stuart, avoiding his lips, simply seeking—he knew—warmth and companionship. She was crying softly.

"So long—" Kari whispered, her arms tight around him. "I've been here so long—with the gods. And I'm so lonely, Derek Stuart. So lonely for green fields and fires and the blue sky. I wish—"

"You'll see Earth again," Stuart promised. At that Kari pulled away. Her strange half-breed loveliness was never more real than then, with tears sparkling on her dark lashes, and her mouth trembling.

She said, a catch in her voice, "I'll show you the weapon, Stuart."

She turned toward the wall. Her hand moved in a quick gesture. A panel opened there in the glowing surface.

Kari reached in, and when she withdrew her arm, it was as though she held a torrent of blood that poured down from her grip. It was a cloak, Stuart saw, made of some material so fine that it rippled like water. Its crimson violence was bizarre against the cool green of Kari's garment.

"This cloak—" she said. "You must wear it if we face the Aesir."

Stuart grimaced. "What good is a piece of cloth? A blaster gun's what I want."

"A blaster wouldn't help," Kari said. "This is more than a piece of cloth, Stuart. It is half alive—made so by the sciences of the Aesir. Wear it! It will protect you."

She swung the great, scarlet billows about Stuart's shoulders. Her fingers fumbled with the clasp at his throat. And then—

She lies!

The desperate urgency of the thought roared through Stuart's mind. He knew

that soundless voice, so sharp now with violent intensity. His hands came up to rip the cloak from him—

He was too late. Kari sprang back, wide-eyed, as the fastenings of the cloak tightened like a noose about Stuart's neck. He felt a stinging shock that ran like white fire along his spine and up into his brain. One instant of blazing disorientation; a hopeless, despairing cry in his mind—a *double* cry, as of two telepathetic voices—and then, his muscles too weak to hold him, he crashed down upon the floor.

It was not paralysis. He was simply drained of all strength. There was pressure about his throat, cold flames along his spine and in his brain, and he could feel the texture of the cloak wrapped about him, striking through his spaceman's garb—tingling, sentient, half-alive!

He whispered an oath. Kari's face had not changed. He read something strangely like pity in her dark eyes.

From the gap in the wall whence she had drawn the cloak came a figure, cloaked in black, a jet cowl hiding its head and face completely. It was taller than the girl by a foot. It shuffled forward with an odd, rocking gait, and paused near her.

Stuart whispered, "I—should have remembered. The—the Aesir can change their shapes. Those giants I saw weren't real. And neither are you—not even human!"

Kari shook her head. "I am real," she said slowly. "He is not." She gestured toward the black-cloaked figure. "But we are all of the Aesir. And, as we thought, you were sent by the Protectors. Now your power is gone, and you must walk the Long Orbit with the other captives."

The cowed creature came forward. It bent, but Stuart could see nothing in the shadow of the hood. A fold of cloth writhed out and touched Stuart's forehead.

Darkness wrapped him like the shroud of the scarlet cloak.

IV

FOR a long time he had only his thoughts for company. They were not pleasant. He felt alone, as he had never felt so utterly lonely and deserted before anywhere in the System. Now he realized that even since his landing on Asgard, he had

had companionship of a sort—that the twin voices murmuring in his brain had been more real than he had realized. A living warmth, a sense of—of *presence*—had been with him then.

But it was gone now. Its absence left a black void within him. He stood alone.

And Kari. . . . If he saw her again when his hands were free, he would kill her. He knew that. But—but her shining smile lightened the darkness that engulfed him now. He had never seen loveliness like Kari's, and he had known so many women, so many, too many. . . . A man who has fought his way Sunward and back again by way of Pluto's chasmed midnight is not so easily misled by the smile of a pretty woman.

Kari was no ordinary woman—God knew she was not! Perhaps not even human, perhaps not even real at all. It might be that very touch of alienage that had stamped her shining image upon his memory, but he could not put the image aside now. He saw her clearly in the darkness of his captivity and the deeper dark of his loneliness, now that the voices were stilled. Lovely, exotic, with the eyes full of longing and terror—what lies they told!—and that lovely, that dazzling smile.

Bitterness made a wry taste in his mouth. Either she was one of the Aesir, or she served them. Served them well. A knife in the heart was the only answer he had for her, and he meant to give her that edged answer if he lived. But she was so very lovely. . . .

Slowly the veil of darkness lifted. He saw a face he had seen before—the harsh, seamed features of the burly Earthman in the pit. And beyond him, the slim Martian girl. All motionless, standing like statues beside him . . . beside him! For Stuart was one of them now. He was in the pit, with the other captives.

Sensation came back slowly. With it came a tingling, a warm vibration along his spine . . . about his throat . . . inside his brain. He could not move, but at the corner of his range of vision flamed a crimsonness—the cloak. He still wore it.

He wondered if the other captives could see him, if their minds were as active as his in their congealed bodies. Or whether the chill of deathlike silence held their brains along with their frozen limbs.

A slow, volcanic fury began to glow within him. Kari—traitor and murderess! Was she Aesir? Was she Earth-born? And that black-cloaked, cowed creature . . . which was not real. Another projector of the Aesir, as the giants had been?

You were sent by the Protectors.

Memory of Kari's phrase came back to Stuart now. And with it, as though he had somehow unbarred a locked gate, opened it a mere crack, came a—a whispering.

Not audible. Faint, faraway, like the shadow of a wind rustling ghosts of autumn leaves, the murmur rose and fell . . . calling him.

The scarlet cloak moved . . . writhed . . . flowed more closely about him. Fainter grew the voices.

Stuart strained after them. His soul sprang up . . . reaching toward those friendly, utterly inhuman whispers that came from nowhere.

A dull lethargy numbed him. The cloak drew tighter. . . .

He ignored it. Deep in the citadel of his mind, he made himself receptive, all his being focused on that—that strange calling from beyond.

And, suddenly, there were words. . . .

"Derek Stuart. Can you hear us? Answer!"

His stiff lips could not speak, but his thoughts formed an answer. And, rising and falling as though the frequency of that incredible telepathy pulsed and changed continually, the message came—

"We have lost. You have lost too, Stuart. But we will stay with you—we *must* stay now—and perhaps your death will be easier because of that. . . ."

"Who are you?" he thought, oddly awed by the personality he sensed behind that voice that was really two voices.

"There is little time." The—sound?—faded into a thin whisper, then grew stronger. "The cloak makes it hard for us to communicate with you. And now we can give you none of our power at all. It is a monstrous thing—a blasphemy such as only the Aesir would create. Half-alive—it makes an artificial synapse between the individual and outside mental contacts. We cannot help you—"

"Who are you?"

"We are the Protectors. Listen now,

Stuart, for soon you must walk the Long Orbit with the others. We removed some of your memories, so the Aesir could not read your mind and have time to prepare themselves—we hoped we might destroy them this time. But—we have failed again. Now—we give you your memories back."

Like a slowly rising tide, Stuart's past began to return. He did not question how this was done; he was too busy lifting the veil that had darkened his mind since—since that night at the Singing Star in New Boston. A few drinks with the tired-eyed man, and then darkness—

But the curtain was lifting now. He remembered . . .

HE remembered a tiny, underground room, with armed men—not many of them—staring at him. A voice that said, "You must either join us or die. We dare run no risks. For hundreds of years a tiny band of us has survived, only because the Aesir did not know we existed."

"Rebels?" he had asked.

"Sworn to destroy the Aesir," the man told him, and an answering glow burned briefly in the eyes of the others.

Stuart laughed.

"You have courage," the man said. "You'll need it. I know why you laugh. But we don't fight alone. Have you ever heard of the Protectors?"

"Never."

"Few have. They aren't human, any more than the Aesir are. But they are not evil. They're humanity's champions. They have sworn to destroy the Aesir, as we have—and so we serve them."

"Who are they, then? What are they?"

"No man knows," the other said quietly. "Who—and where—they are is a secret they keep to themselves. But we hear their messages. And once in a lifetime, not oftener, they tell us where we may find some man they have winnowed the planets to discover. In our lifetime, Stuart, you are the man."

He gaped at them. "Why? I—"

"To be a weapon for the Protectors—a champion for mankind. The Protectors are so far beyond humanity they cannot fight our battles in their own forms. They need a—a vessel into which they can pour their power. Or—call it a sword to wield against the Aesir. They have searched

the worlds over for a long while now, and you—" The man hesitated, looking narrowly at Stuart. "You are the only vessel they found. You have a great destiny, Derek Stuart."

He had scowled at them. "All right, suppose I have. What do they offer?"

The man shook his head. "Death—if you're lucky. No man before you has ever won a battle for the Protectors. You know that—the Aesir still rule! Every chance is against you. In a thousand years no man has won the gamble. But this is greater than you or us, Derek Stuart. Do you think you have any choice?"

Stuart stared the other man in the eyes. "There's no chance?"

The leader smiled. All mankind's indomitable hope was in the smile.

"Would the Protectors have spent all their efforts, and ours, to find you if there were no hope? They have mighty and terrible powers. With the right man for their vessel, they could be stronger than the Aesir. No man could stand alone against the Aesir. The Protectors could not stand alone. But together—sword and hand and brain welded into one—yes, Stuart, there's a chance!"

"Then why have the others failed?"

"No one has yet been quite strong enough. Only once in forty years—fifty—is a man born who might, with luck, have the courage and the strength. Look at us here—do you think we would not offer ourselves gladly? Instead, the Protectors guided us to you. If you are willing to let them establish contact with your mind, enter it, possess it—there's a chance the Aesir can be destroyed. There's a chance that man's slavery may be ended!" His voice shook with that mighty hope.

Stuart glanced around at the ardent, fanatical faces, and something in him took a slow fire from the fire in theirs. A deep and vital purpose, as old as humanity—how many times before in Earth's history had men of Earth gathered in hidden rooms and sworn vows against tyranny and oppression? How many times before had Earthmen dedicated themselves and their son's sons, if need be, to the old, old dream that though men may die, mankind must in the end be free?

Here in this crowded room the torch of freedom still burned, despite the hell of

slavery under which the worlds toiled now. He hesitated.

"It won't be easy, Stuart," the man warned. "A sword-blade must be hammered on the anvil, heated in flame, before it's tempered. The Protectors will test you—so that your mind may be toughened to resist the attacks of the Aesir later. You will suffer. . . ."

He had suffered. Those agonizing, nightmare dreams in the forest, the phantoms that had tortured him—other trials he did not want to remember. But there had been no flaw in the blade. In the end—the Protectors had been satisfied, and had entered his mind—maintaining the contact that still held, though thinly now.

And the voices he heard still whispering within him were the voices of his mentors . . .

"We took your memories from you. So that the Aesir could not read too much in your mind, and be forewarned. Now that does not matter, and you will be stronger with your memory restored. But when you let the girl clasp the cloak about you—that was failure."

"If I could move," Stuart thought. "If I could rip it off—"

"It is part of you. We do not know how it can be removed. And while you wear it, we cannot give you our power."

Stuart said bitterly. "If you'd given me that power in the first place—"

"WE did. How do you think you survived the first testing by the Aesir? And it is dangerous. We must gauge it carefully, so that we do not transmit too much of our mental energy to you. You are merely human—if we let you draw on a tenth of our power, that would burn you out like a melting wire under a strong current."

"So—what now?"

"We have lost again. You have lost, and we are sorry. All we can do is give you an easy death. We possess you now, mentally; if we should withdraw from your brain, you would die instantly. We will do that whenever you ask. For the Aesir will kill you anyhow now, and not pleasantly."

"I'm not committing suicide. As long as I live, I can still fight."

"We also. This has happened before.

We have chosen and possessed other champions, and they have failed. We withdrew from their minds before the Aesir . . . killed . . . so that we could survive to try again. To wage another battle. Some day we will win. Some day we shall destroy the Aesir. But we dare not cling to our broken swords, lest we too be broken."

"So when the going gets tough you step out!"

Stuart sensed pity in the strange twin voice. "We must. We fight for the race of man. And the greatest gift we can give you now is quick death."

"I don't want it," Stuart thought furiously. "I'm going to keep on fighting! Maybe that's why you've always failed before—you were too ready to give up. So I'll die if you step out of my mind? Well—it's a lousy bargain!"

There was no anger, only a stronger overtone of pity in the still voice.

"What is it you want, Stuart?"

"Nothing from you! Just let me go on living. I'll do my own fighting. There'll be time enough to take a powder when the axe falls. I'm asking you simply this—keep me alive until I've had another crack at the Aesir!"

A pause. "It is dangerous. Dangerous for us. But—"

"Well?"

"We will take the risk. But understand—we *must* leave you if the peril grows too great. And will—inevitably."

"Thanks," Stuart said, and meant it. "One thing. What about Kari? Who is she?"

"A hundred years ago she was human. Then she was brought here, and the Aesir possessed her—as we possess you. She has grown less human in that time, as the alien grows stronger within her. She has only faint memories of her former life now, and *they* will vanish soon. Contact with the Aesir is like an infection—she will grow more and more like them. Perhaps, eventually, become one of them."

Stuart grimaced. "If the Aesir should withdraw from her—"

"She would die, yes. Her own life-force has been sapped too far. You and she are kept alive only as long as the bond of possession holds."

Nice, Stuart thought. If the Aesir were destroyed, Kari would die with him. And if *he* faced doom, he too would die, as the Protectors withdrew to avoid sharing his fate.

Hell—what did he care whether Kari lived or died? It was only the glamor of half-alienage that had drawn him to the girl. A dagger in her throat—

Besides, he was certainly facing doom now.

"All I can do—" he said—and stopped abruptly. He was speaking aloud. Patiently the twin voice in his brain waited for him to continue.

Slowly he flexed his arms. He tilted back his head, staring up at the rim of the pit fifty feet above him. He could see the titan pillars rising toward the roof of that mighty tower, incredibly far above. But there was no sign of life.

"I can move," he said. "I—"

Struck by a new thought, he gripped the folds of the cloak. It was nauseously warm and vibrant. It seemed to move under his hands. He jerked at it, and felt a twinge of agonizing pain along his spine and about his throat, while a white-hot lance stabbed into his skull.

"If I could get rid of this—you could help me?"

"We could give you our power, to use against the Aesir. But we do not know how to remove the cloak."

"I don't either," Stuart growled, and paused as a movement caught his eye. The muscular Earthman near him was stirring.

He turned slowly. Beyond him the Martian girl swayed her feathery-crested head and lifted supple, slender arms. And the others—all about Stuart they were wakening to motion.

But no life showed in their dull eyes. No understanding. Only a blind, empty withdrawal.

They turned, trooped toward the wall of the pit . . . toward an arched opening that was gaping suddenly.

"The Long Orbit," said the voice in Stuart's mind.

"What's that?"

"Death. As the Aesir feed. They feed on the life-force of living organisms."

"Is that the only way out?"

"The only way open to you. Yes."

STUART went slowly after the others. They had crossed the threshold now, and were pacing along a tunnel, lit with cold blue brilliance, that curved very gradually toward the left. Behind him a panel closed.

The cloak swayed like a great blood-stain behind him, moving in a motion not entirely caused by Stuart's movements. He tried again to unfasten it, but the clasp at his throat only drew tighter. And the tingling sensation increased along his spine.

An artificial synapse . . . blocking his nerve-ends so that he could not draw upon the Protectors' power. . . .

At his left was an alcove in the tunnel wall. It was filled with coagulated light . . . bright with glaring flames . . . flame-hot. Within that white curtain stirred swift movement, like the leaping of fires. Above the recess a symbol was embossed in the stone. The sign of Mercury.

"Mercury," said the voice in Stuart's mind. "The Servant of the Sun. The Swift Messenger. Mercury, that drinks the Sun's fires and blazes like a star in the sky's abyss. First in the Long Orbit—Mercury."

The crowd of prisoners, dull-eyed, swayed to and fro, a ripple of excitement rustling through them. Abruptly the Martian girl darted forward—

Was engulfed in the milky flames.

Stood there, while curdled opalescence veiled her. On her face sheer horror, as—

"The Aesir feed," the voice whispered. "They drink the cup of her life . . . to its last dregs."

The captives were moving again. Silently Stuart followed them along the tunnel. Now another recess showed in the wall.

Blue . . . blue, this time, as hazy seas of enchantment . . . misted with fog, with slow shifting movement within it. . . .

"The sign of Venus," said the voice. "The Clouded World. Planet of life and womb of creation. Ruler of mists and seas—Venus!"

The Earthman was drawn into the alcove. Stood there, while azure seas washed higher and higher about him. Through that glassy veil his face glared, stiff with alien fear. . . .

The sacrifices went on.

There was no alcove, no symbol for Earth. The Aesir had forgotten the world

that had been their place of birth.

"Mars! Red star of madness! Ruler of man's passion, lord of the bloody seas! Where scarlet sands run through Time's hourglass—Mars, third in the Long Orbit!"

The crimson glow of a dusty ruby . . . the face of a Venusian, strained, twisted in agony . . . the hunger of the Aesir. . . .

"The Little Worlds! The Great Belt that girdles the Inner System! The Broken Planet—"

Tiny goblin lights, dancing and flickering, blue and sapphire and dull orange, wine-red and dawn-yellow—

The hunger of the Aesir.

"Jupiter! Titan! Colossus of the Spaceroads! Jupiter, whose mighty hands seize the ships of man and drag them to his boiling heart! The Great One-fifth in the Long Orbit!"

The hunger of the Aesir.

"Ringed Saturn light-crowned! Guardian of the outer skies! Saturn—"

Uranus . . . Neptune. . . .

Pluto.

The hunger of the Aesir. . . .

Beyond Pluto, dark worlds Stuart had not known. Until finally he was alone. The last of his companions had been drawn into one of the vampire alcoves of the Long Orbit.

He went on.

There was another recess in the wall at his left. It was filled with night. Jet blackness, cold and horrible, brimmed it.

Something like an invisible current dragged him forward, though he fought with all his strength to resist. Instinctively he sent out a desperate call to the Protectors.

"We cannot aid you. We must leave you . . . you will die instantly."

"Wait! Don't—don't give up yet! Give me your power—"

"We cannot. While you wear the cloak."

The edge of blackness touched Stuart with a frigid impact. He felt something, avid with horrible hunger, strain forward from of the alcove, reaching for him. The cloak billowed out—

Sweat stood out on Stuart's face. For, suddenly, he had seen the way. It might mean death, it would certainly mean frightful agony—but he could go down fighting. If the cloak could not be removed in any

other way—perhaps it could be ripped off!

He gripped the half-living fabric at its bottom, brought his arm behind him—and tore the horror from him!

STARK, abysmal nerve-shock poured like a current of fire up his spine and into his brain. It was like tearing off his own skin. Sick, blind, gasping dry-throated sobs, Stuart stumbled away from the black alcove, tearing at the cloak. It tried to cling to him—

He ripped it away—hurled it from him. And as it fell—it screamed!

But he was free.

For an instant sheer weakness overwhelmed him. Then into him poured a racing, jubilant torrent of strength, of mighty, intoxicating power that seemed to heal his wounds and revivify him instantly.

Into him surged the power of the Protectors!

From the alcove a finger of darkness tendrilled out. He was borne away from it . . . along the passage. Dimly, through drifting mists, he sensed that he was moving up a ramp . . . through a wall that seemed to grow intangible as he approached it . . . up and up . . .

He was in the hall of the Aesir.

Above him the cyclopean pillars towered, dwarfing the thrones set between them. Before him hung the shifting wall of light.

He was carried toward it—through it.

He stood on a black dais. Facing him was the cloaked, cowed figure he had last seen with Kari.

And beside the Aesir stood Kari!

The creature lifted its arm . . . a red flame spouted toward Stuart. Sudden, mocking laughter spilled from his lips. He no longer fought alone. The tremendous power of the Protectors blazed within him, power and energy and force that could smash suns.

In midair the fiery lance failed and died. The Aesir drew back a step, drawing its cloak about it as if in surprise. And Kari—Kari shrank back, too, and something strangely like hope flashed for a moment across her dazzling, her more than mortal loveliness. Hope? But she was of the Aesir now. And if they failed, she died. Then why—

The Aesir's cloak flickered, and a second gush of fiery light fountained toward Stuart.

Up surged the tide of power in him again. Blind and dazed with his own tremendous energy, Stuart felt a curve like a dim shield flung up to meet that lance. The Aesir's fire struck—and flashed into blazing fragments on the Protector's shield. Each droplet sang intolerable music as it faded and winked out. And behind the Aesir, more dazzling than any immortal fire had been, Stuart saw Kari's sudden, shining smile. . . .

She would die if the Aesir failed. She must know she would die. But the brilliance of her smile struck him as the Aesir's spear of fire could never strike. He knew, then. He understood. . . .

The Aesir's cloak whirled like a storm-cloud, in dark, deep billows. The Aesir itself grew taller for a moment, as if it drew itself up to a godlike height. And then it did for Derek Stuart what no Aesir had ever done for a mortal man before. No Aesir had ever needed to. It cast off the hampering cloak and stood stripped for battle with this primitive manling whose forebears immemorially long ago had been the Aesir's forebears. There was in that stripping something almost of kinship—an acknowledgment that here at last in the hall of the Aesir stood an equal, sprung of equal stock. . . .

Naked in its terrible power, the Aesir stood up to face the man.

Not human. Not ever human, except in the mysterious basics which these people of a thousand millenniums in the future had chosen to retain. The flesh they had cast off, and the flesh the Aesir stood up in to face his forebear was pure, blazing, blinding energy. Twice as tall as a man it stood, shining with supernal brilliance, terrible and magnificent.

The great hall rang soundlessly with the power of the Protectors.

And then from above a streak of light came flashing, and another, and another. And were engulfed in the one Aesir who stood shining before its adversary, growing ever brighter and more terrible. The rest of the Aesir, coming to the aid of their fellow, forming a single entity to crush the champion of mankind.

Stuart braced himself for the incredible

torrent of energy that would come blasting through him from the Protectors. And in a split second—it came!

Mind and body reeled beneath the impact of that power as force flared through him and struck out at the tower of lightning which was the Aesir. But the force which was trying his human body to its utmost was not force enough to touch that blinding column. Energy lashed out from it, struck him a reeling blow—Stuart dropped to his knees, the hall swimming in fire around him.

But what he saw was not the terrible, blazing image of his adversary, but Kari's face beyond. His falling meant her life—but when she saw him go down the brilliance dimmed upon her features. The hope he had seen there went out like a candle-flame and she was once more only a vessel of human flesh which the Aesir had possessed and degraded.

In his despair and his dizziness he cried soundlessly, "Help me, Protectors! Give me your power!"

The still double-voice said, "You could not hold it. You would be burned out utterly."

"I'll hold it long enough!" he promised desperately. "One second of power—only that! Enough to smash the Aesir. Then death—but not till then!"

There was one instant when time stopped. That cataclysmic horror that had risen a thousand years ago and raged through the worlds like a holocaust stood blazing before Stuart's eyes. It stooped toward him, poising for the hammer blow that would smash him to nothing—

THEN a power like the drive of galaxies through space thundered into Stuart's mind.

He had not expected this. Nothing in human experience could have taught him to expect it. For the Protectors were not human. No more human than the Aesir themselves. And the unleashed energy that roared soundlessly through Stuart rocked his very soul on its foundations. He could not stir. He could not think. He could only stay upon his knees facing the Aesir-thing as galactic power thundered through him and wielded him like a sword against man's enemies.

Higher and higher rose the crashing

tides of contest. The citadel shook ponderously upon the rocks of the god-made little world. Perhaps that world itself staggered in space as the titans battled together on its rocking surface.

Faster spun the core of radiant light which was the Aesir. Faster raced the tides of power through Stuart's blasted body, seeming to rip his very flesh apart and blaze in his brain like hammers of cosmic fire.

Terribly, terribly he yearned for surcease, for the end of this unthinkable destruction that was tearing his brain and body apart. And he knew he could end it in a moment, if he chose to let go. . . .

Grimly he clung to the power that was destroying him. Second by second, counting each moment an eternity, he clung to consciousness. The crashing lances of the Protectors drove on upon the armor of the Aesir, and the cyclopean pillars of the great hall reeled upon their foundations, and the very air blazed into liquid fire around him.

He never knew what final blow of cosmic violence ended that battle. But suddenly, without warning, the vast column of the Aesir pulsed with violent brilliance and the whole hall rang with a cry too shrill and terrible for ears or the very mind to hear, except as a thrilling of despair.

The tower rocked. All the bright tapestries billowed and flowed against the walls. And the radiant thing that was the Aesir—

Went out like a blown flame. Stuart saw it darken in the quickness of a heart-beat from blinding brightness to an angry, sullen scarlet, and then to the color of embers, and then to darkness.

There was nothing there at all.

And Stuart's brain dimmed with it. One last glimpse he had of the shining smile on Kari's face, triumph and delight, in the instant before the cloudiness of oblivion blotted her features out.

He was not dead. Somewhere, far away, his body lay prone upon the cold pavement of the Aesir's hall, a hall terribly empty now of life. But Stuart himself hung in empty space, somewhere between life and death.

The thought of the Protectors touched him gently, almost caressingly.

"You are a mighty man, Derek Stuart.

Your name shall not be forgotten while mankind lives."

With infinite effort he roused his mind. "Kari—" he said.

There was silence for a moment—a warm silence. But the voices, speaking as one, said gently, "Have you forgotten? When the Aesir died, Kari died too. And you, Derek Stuart—you can never go back to your body now. You remember that?"

Sudden rebellion shook Stuart's bodiless brain. "Get out of my mind!" he raged at the double voice. "What do you know about human beings? I've won for mankind—but what did I win for myself? Nothing—nothing! And Kari—Get out of my mind and let me die! What do *you* know about love?"

Amazingly, laughter pulsed softly.

"Love?" said the double voice. "Love? You have not guessed who we are?"

Stuart's bewildered mind framed only a voiceless question.

"We know humanity," the twin voices said. "We were human once, a thousand years ago. Very human, Derek Stuart. And we remembered love."

He half guessed the answer. "You are—"

"There was a man and a woman once," the voices told him gently. "Mankind still remembers their legend—John Starr and Lorna, who defied the Aesir."

"John Starr and Lorna!"

"We fought the Aesir in the days when we and they were human. We worked with them on the entropy device that made them what they are now—and made us—ourselves. When we saw what they planned with their power, we fought. . . . But they were five, and strong because they were ruthless. We had to flee."

The voices that spoke as one voice were distant, remembering.

"They grew in power on their Asgard world, changing as the millenniums swept over them, as entropy accelerated for them. And we changed, too, in our own place, in our different way. We are not human now. But we are not monsters, as the Aesir were. We have known failure and bitterness and defeat many times, Derek Stuart. But we remember humanity. And as for love—"

Stuart said bitterly:

"You know *your* love. You have it for-

ever. But Kari . . . Kari is dead."

The voices were very gentle. "You have sacrificed more than we. You gave up your love and your bodies. We—"

SILENCE again. Then the woman, serene and gentle-voiced, "There is a way, John. But not an easy one—for us."

Stuart thought, "But Kari is dead."

The woman said, "Her body is empty of the Aesir life-force. And yours is burned out by the power we poured through it, so that no human could live in it again unless—unless one more than human upheld you."

"Lorna—"

"We must part for awhile, John. We have been one for a long while. Now we must be two again, for the sake of these two. Until the change. . . ."

"What change?" asked Stuart eagerly.

"As we changed, so would you, if our lives upheld yours. Entropy would move for you as it moved for the Aesir and for us. And that, too, I think, is good. Mankind will need a leader. And we can help—John and I—more surely if we taste again of humanity. After awhile—after millenniums—the circle will close and John and I will be free to merge again. And you and Kari, too."

Stuart thought, "But Kari—*will* it be Kari?"

"It will be," the gentle voice said. "Cleansed of the evil of the Aesir, supported by my own strength, as you by John's. You will be yourselves again, with the worlds before you, and afterward—a dwelling among the stars, with us. . . ."

The man's voice said, "Lorna, Lorna—"

"You know we must, beloved," the softer voice said. "We have asked too much of them to offer nothing in repayment. And it will not be goodbye."

There was darkness and silence.

Stuart was dimly aware of cyclopean heights rising above him. Painfully he stirred. He was clothed in his own body again, and the battle-blasted hall of the dead Aesir towered high into the dimness above him.

He turned his head.

Beside him on the dais a girl, lying crumpled in the shower of her hair, stirred and sighed.

Electron Eat Electron

By NOEL LOOMIS

(Editor's note: When we had read through this in-a-class-by-itself story, we exclaimed, "Here's PLANET'S scoop on the world!" What do you think? Does Mr. Loomis answer the questions: "How will future wars be fought? Will civilization be destroyed?")

SUPREME GENERAL HOSHAWK, chief of staff, watched with piercing gray eyes while the President of the United States of the Western Hemisphere, Jeffrey Wadsworth, lay relaxed under a cosmic-ray lamp, with no covering but a towel over his loins.

The surgeon-general of the Hemispheric Armies raised his hand, and the lamp receded.

"Is that enough?" Hoshawk asked dryly.

"It's the maximum, even for him," said the surgeon-general. "His reflexes will be faster than light itself."

Hoshawk grunted, his eyes narrow. As far as he could see, the speed of a man's reflexes, even of a man who was about to champion seven hundred million persons, wasn't as important as the man's loyalty or his sense of personal responsibility. And Hoshawk did not have much use for Wadsworth.

Augusto Iraola of Brazil, deputy president for South America, stepped forward from the group of forty men. He asked the President anxiously, "How do you feel?" Iraola was old and bearded.

"Not bad," said the President, and his voice squeaked a little as it changed pitch.

The Minister of State, with a big portfolio under his arm, said, "Shouldn't we prepare the vice president?"

Morrison, vice president for Canada, spoke pedantically, "It would be a tragedy to lose President Wadsworth. Last month his I.Q. was 340, nearly twenty points above any other member of the Mutant College."

Hoshawk barely caught himself in time to repress a snort. A boy of sixteen, no

matter what his I.Q., was just a kid. You couldn't expect him to exhibit initiative or even to take things seriously. That was why Hoshawk had almost broken with the Hemispheric Congress thirty years before—almost two of President Jeffrey's lifetimes, Hoshawk reflected wryly.

The voice of the President, slightly amused, came to them. "I'm all right now," he said. "I think I ate too much ice cream last night. Nine dishes."

There were gasps. Hoshawk held back his sarcasm, but he could not refrain from a triumphant glance at the ancient Minister of State, who avoided his eyes.

Iraola was volatile. "Sabotage!" he said.

President Wadsworth licked his lips with the tip of his tongue. "No, the new pineapple-avocado. Very good, gentlemen. I recommend it."

The neuro-analyst whipped a graph from his machine. Hoshawk barely looked at the graph. "Speed of reaction down to zero, point, nine zeros, three, four—three times normal speed. Let's get on with the war."

THE President's eyes had been fixed hopefully on Hoshawk's grizzled face, and at Hoshawk's words he relaxed. His muscles rippled an instant, and then he was standing.

It was always a little shock to Hoshawk to see him move. It wasn't right that any man, even a Superior Mutant, should be able to move faster than light-speed. You didn't dare to trust a man like that.

Forty august heads—all but Hoshawk's—inclined as the President stood there, but the President just smiled at them and



Illustrated by MARTIN

spawned and stretched luxuriously.

Hoshawk was annoyed, but there was nothing he could do about it. The Hemispheric Congress had set up the Mutant College two hundred years ago, and every child with I.Q. above 200 and physique to match, became a member, for the sole purpose of selecting a President whose primary duty would be to fight a war, if it should come in his term, on one of the giant keyboards. This had been a concession to left-wing agitation that, if there was to be another war, it should be fought by the leaders and not by the ranks.

The Mutant College had been established when the Hunyas had overrun Europe and Asia, and now for two centuries there had been no war, but only preparation for war, East against West, through systems of selection and training closely parallel, but with a difference that was forever in Hoshawk's mind—if he was a capable man, the Hunyas kept him for twenty-one years. And obviously you could depend a lot more on a man of thirty-five than you could on a boy sixteen.

Forgacs, president of the Hunyas, was thirty-three—an old man for a mutant, and smart and clever as only a mutant could be at that age.

Yesterday the Hunyas had challenged.

It was sudden, but not unexpected. There was no reason for delay. At six o'clock tonight the two hemispheres would match force, and by eight o'clock it would be over.

JEFFREY WADSWORTH moved. One instant he was before them with a towel around the middle of his bronze body, the next instant he was standing there dressed in light plastic slippers, red trunks and a sleeveless blue shirt. If Hoshawk hadn't been so old, he would have been envious of the President's physique.

"Gentlemen," Jeffrey said, "I am ready to go to the Chamber." He rubbed his bare midriff in the region of his stomach.

"Are you ill?" Hoshawk asked quickly.

"No," Jeffrey watched the forty statesmen file out.

"Sire," said Hoshawk, and his manner was respectful, for this boy of sixteen was his commander-in-chief, "I still wish we had trained a few thousand men in the

use of weapons. I don't see how we can fight a war with electronic tubes."

Jeffrey looked at him gravely. "War with men is primitive. Lives can't be replaced."

Hoshawk sputtered. "There's never been any civilized war."

"This time there will be," Jeffrey said confidently.

"But—"

"We'll win," Jeffrey repeated. "We *must* win." And Hoshawk caught a flash of something deep in his eyes. Hoshawk could not quite identify it, and yet he knew it spoke of the inner wisdom and conviction of the young. And in that direction, Hoshawk reasoned, lay their weakness.

"There'll be trickery from Forgacs," Hoshawk predicted.

"Quite possible," said Wadsworth. "I don't trust him, myself. He challenged on a technicality."

Hoshawk was gratified to hear a worried note in the President's voice. "He claimed we violated the Agreement of 2118," he said, probing, "by keeping scientific discoveries to ourselves."

Wadsworth answered quietly, "Then he challenged because he himself had secrets that he believed more potent."

"Nevertheless," said Hoshawk, "a few hundred men trained in the use of tanks—"

Jeffrey shook his head. "And revert to the primitive," he pointed out. "If the world is ever to get away from that kind of war, this is the time to prove it."

"And if we lose, we do so at the expense of a hemisphere."

"That's true," Jeffrey said calmly. "But if we should win by using men and destroying lives, we would do so at the expense of a civilization. By the act of reverting to the use of human fighters, we would convince the world that war could not be fought electronically."

They reached the door of the Chamber. The President shook hands with Iraola and with Hoshawk.

"Wish me luck," he said lightly.

They inclined their heads, and when they looked up, the President was seated on a beryllium stool that traveled a three-quarter circle before the great bank of keys like the keyboard of a giant organ. He pulled on a glass helmet and adjusted the

sonic amplifiers to his mastoids. He flicked the oxygen valve open and shut, and then looked at it and listened intently.

Hoshawk saw an instant's doubt on the President's face. Hoshawk wondered if the valve was leaking, and frowned. The Chamber had been tested exhaustively, but with hundreds of thousands of circuits, cut-backs, by-passes, and relays, it was possible the oxygen valve had been overlooked.

JEFFREY strapped himself into the chair. The chronometer showed five minutes before the Hour. The President looked at the huge curved map of the Atlantic, now aglow with light above the big keyboard. His eyes swept the thousands of ivory keys and he rubbed his hands together for a final limbering of his fingers.

He spoke, and his intent voice came to them through the amplifier: "HHQ."

"North America is completely evacuated, Sire, to the Polar ice-cap. There is now no human being on the continent. The Hunyas refused our request to declare New York an open city, and it was evacuated thirty minutes ago."

The President called for a chronometer check. The instrument in the Chamber had lost two hundredths of a second, and Hoshawk could see that Jeffrey was making a mental note of that. He was forced to admit that the young mutant was thorough.

There were two minutes left. Jeffrey sat straight before the great keyboard, poised an instant, and then his incredibly facile fingers played the keys, flashing from one bank to the next, shooting the chair to right and to left, while he watched the map above him and the great bank of lights on each side. Then he leaned back, relaxed.

Hoshawk was glad now they were playing it safe. Jeffrey had insisted on the Midwest Chamber in preference to the Pacific or Atlantic station. For this was modern war. There would be only one person killed. This was a war of electronics, deadly and final, but no one would be actually killed but the losing President. That was decreed by the Six-Continent Council.

It was one minute before the hour. The President pressed a key.

The Starter answered: "President Wadsworth, are you ready?"

"Ready," said Jeffrey in a high voice.

Hoshawk heard the Starter's voice: "President Forgacs, are you ready?"

"Ja," came the deep voice of the Hunyac president.

Jeffrey flicked the oxygen valve for a second, snapped it off, and Hoshawk saw him glance down at it. Then Jeffrey sat poised, all the alertness of his incredible mind bearing intently on the map before him.

A bell sounded. The war was on!

Jeffrey did not move. He waited, and watched. Ten trillion electronic tubes would flash their information on the Map. He waited—one minute, two minutes, five minutes. The Map was dark.

So Forgacs wanted him to move first.

Jeffrey flicked the oxygen and his chair shot to the left. His fingers blurred into movement. He shot back to the center of the keyboard and focused his entire intellect on the Map.

A dozen tiny red lights rose off the coast of Newfoundland and raced eastward. Each light represented a thousand rockets loaded with thirty tons of DTN. One of those rockets would wipe Berlin from the earth—if it struck.

But Hoshawk knew the President did not expect them to reach Europe.

They did not. Near the coast of Holland they began to wink out. One got as far as Cologne.

If the Chamber had been above ground instead of three hundred feet deep in solid rock, they would have felt the concussion, for DTN's powerful waves traveled at the speed of light.

Still there was no answer.

Jeffrey's fingers played for an instant on the keys. Red lights rose from Labrador, from near Boston, from Florida, and streaked east—not for Berlin this time, but for Marseilles.

Jeffrey was testing Forgacs' explosive screen. It was wholly effective; one after the other, the trains of red lights winked out.

But now there was an answer. From the Bay of Biscay red lights with black dots on them began to wink on as the mammoth tabulating machine in the room below recorded the information from thou-

sands of hidden electronic tubes, totaled it, and presented it on the Map.

The President hardly watched them. His screen with its principal power-plant in Philadelphia would stop the rockets, up to a total of some seventy-five octillion macro-ergs.

On the off chance that Forgacs would forget to close his screen after his rockets had passed it, Jeffrey fired a salvo from the Bahamas.

Forgacs answered with three salvos from Brest, and Jeffrey gave him back ten from Long Island, then Hoshawk frowned as he saw the President rub his stomach. Hoshawk had always opposed that abominable atavistic confection called ice cream.

It was a game of incredibly swift calculation and rapier thrusts from strong point to strong point in the effort to break through the screen. Once the screen should be broken, anything might happen.

JEFFREY could see when his own screen was up, but their science had devised no way to detect the enemy's screen except by firing into it. Jeffrey pressed a pedal with his left foot, and a thin golden line flashed on in a flattened arc from Greenland down through the Atlantic and curved around the Falkland Islands.

Jeffrey's screen was up. The Biscay salvos began to wink out against it. Jeffrey's hands began to flash. Red lights winking up along the coast of Europe and from North Africa showed that Forgacs was opening up.

Jeffrey cut in the oxygen for a second and flicked it off, then his left foot slashed at the pedal as he cut his screen to let his own rockets through and then threw it on again to stop the enemy.

Forgacs was beginning a drive on Philadelphia, the site of the power plant. Jeffrey was watching for an opening to Marseilles, vulnerable for the same reason.

Jeffrey kept firing rockets, but his mutant mind would be racing ahead, calculating with infinite precision the times of discharge and times of arrival.

It was apparent by now that Forgacs' most powerful defenses were centered around Marseilles, because Forgacs was not using them. This meant he was not taking a chance on opening the Marseilles sector of the screen.

Jeffrey calculated the probable interchange of batteries for some sixty moves ahead, Hoshawk knew, then he began to fire the Philadelphia batteries at intervals.

The firing rose in intensity, and Jeffrey's faster-than-light fingers played the great keyboard like a master organ. A bell sounded and his right foot threw on the western screen with its automatic cut-out.

And all the time Jeffrey fired his big Philadelphia batteries at intervals with a definite rhythm—five, three, and six seconds.

He shot to the right and manipulated a bank of keys and was back in the center almost instantaneously.

He did not pause in his rocket salvos, but in three minutes and eight seconds his first salvo of one-ton atom bombs would reach the Marseilles screen. If he had calculated correctly, the Marseilles screen would be open for an instant just as the atom bombs reached it. He didn't think Forgacs could resist the temptation to blast Philadelphia with his Marseilles batteries.

Presently a thousand red lights winked up from the screen at Marseilles. But Forgacs overlooked the atom bombs. They were slower than the rockets, and there was no way to tell, from the Map, which was which.

Jeffrey shot a look at the chronometer, and Hoshawk saw the atom bombs go through. A few seconds later the glow in Marseilles began to redden, and Hoshawk exulted. The atom bombs had done their work. The Marseilles screen was weakening.

Jeffrey played the keys with fantastic speed. The war would soon be over. Thousands of little red lights began streaking toward Marseilles. At first they exploded in air as they hit the screen, but as the explosive force of the DTN began to drain the screen, those behind began to pour through.

But there was a flash from Philadelphia, and a shock went through Hoshawk. Something was wrong there. Jeffrey hadn't intended that. Forgacs had used atom bombs and had broken through when the screen was down.

Jeffrey's fingers snatched at the oxygen valve. He tore it off and threw it on the floor. He still held one important advan-

tage. He was ahead of Forgacs by forty seconds.

Philadelphia went out and the golden defensive screen began to fade, but Jeffrey, tensely erect, stayed on the attack. Hundreds of green lights began to rise around Marseilles—great submarines, controlled by electronics and carrying tanks and guns and explosives.

The green lights converged on Marseilles. They got through the screen. Now was the big gamble. Jeffrey guessed that Forgacs would operate from an underground chamber near Marseilles itself.

It wasn't a logical thing to do, and so Forgacs would do it, believing that Jeffrey would pass Marseilles and go inland to find the Chamber.

Jeffrey let him believe that. He sent eight thousand giant electron-controlled bombers through the Marseilles gap and straight for Berlin.

The green lights started winking on the coast of France, showing the submarines were unloading amphibious tanks. Jeffrey started them out across France at high speed. Near Paris they met heavy resistance from Forgacs' tank-killers.

But now Jeffrey had more trouble. Forgacs had slipped a salvo of atom bombs into the Labrador power station, and the entire north quadrant of Jeffrey's screen was down. And just at that instant, the automatic breaker failed and a tube burned out in the Montevideo power station, and the southern half of South America was exposed. Green lights began to wink up at the open spaces.

JEFFREY was grim. It was near the end. Dog eat dog. His flying fingers chose to ignore Forgacs' attack, beyond firing millions of salvos of small rockets which were little better than a delaying action.

There were only two targets in this war—the Chambers.

Jeffrey released his trump—thirty-five hundred flying robot tanks.

They rocketed through the Marseilles screen and came on the city from the land side, firing eight-inch rockets and shooting flames out half a mile ahead.

But this was a feint, too. From the sea now rose a great armada of robot submarine carriers that spewed out tanks that

were little more than armored tank-cars filled with jellied XPR, which exploded always down, toward the center of gravitation. They poured out the jelly on the surface around Marseilles for a distance of twenty miles until according to Jeffrey's figures the ground was covered a foot thick. The flame-throwers roared into it and Jeffrey stopped them there.

Then he fired his last salvo of atom-bombs from the Bahamas.

In the meantime, Forgacs' tanks had overrun Boston, searching for the American Chamber.

The lights began to wink out, and Hoshawk knew that Boston was being destroyed.

Orange lights, indicating bombers, were heading for Chicago, and Hoshawk knew that if Jeffrey's guess on Marseilles was bad, he had not much longer to live.

He looked at the Map. The atom-bombs were at Marseilles. A glow showed around the twenty-mile circle that he had covered with jelly, and Hoshawk knew the atom-bombs had landed.

He knew that on the other continent, the most tremendous explosion in man's history was taking place. And when it was over there would be a mile-deep crater where Marseilles had been, and anything, no matter how deep it was buried, would be destroyed by concussion.

Jeffrey still played the keys, but his eyes were on the orange lights approaching Chicago.

They reached Chicago, perhaps directly over their heads, but Hoshawk felt no bombs. A moment later the planes were still going westward.

Jeffrey called the Starter. "Does Forgacs concede?" he asked.

There was a moment's delay, then, "Forgacs does not answer."

The President let out an undignified whoop. He tore off the straps that held him in the chair, threw his helmet across the Chamber. "We won!"

The Hemispheric diplomats were gathering excitedly in the corridor. Jeffrey unsealed the Chamber.

Hoshawk shook hands with him. "You did it," he said gruffly. "I apologize for ever thinking—"

The Chamber shuddered, and Hoshawk

paled, but Jeffrey held up his hand. He glanced at the chronometer. "That was Marseilles blowing up," he said.

His feet moved and he was gone. In a moment he was back. "Excuse me, gentlemen," he begged. "I've got to see the squad. Just figured out a way to beat the Blues. If you—"

He stopped, frowned.

He had felt it before they did—a distant blast. Then they heard it—a dull explosion through three hundred feet of solid rock above them. The floor shuddered under their feet.

It came again, and again, farther away. A pattern. Then off somewhere else came another string of explosions.

The forty august heads stared at the ceiling. Mouths were open, but the President's mutant brain in seconds analyzed the possibilities and came up with the answer:

"Atom-bombs!"

"Impossible!" growled Hoshawk. "Forgacs' Chamber was destroyed."

The President was already back in the Chamber. He pressed a key.

"Starter," came the answer. "Forgacs' Chamber is destroyed. You have won the war."

Hoshawk was behind him. "But he's still firing, isn't he?"

"No." The President was icily alert. He pointed to the big map. There were no red pin-points that would indicate rockets or bombs coming from the European continent. "The Chamber is gone. Undeniably gone."

A new pattern of bomb-bursts came from above. "Chicago must be destroyed by now," said the President harshly. He pointed to a blacked-out area on the ground-glass screen above. "There are no detector tubes left above us. But look—orange lights. Thousands of them coming from the sea on the Maryland coast. And look there, to the right. One—two—fifteen thousand bombers coming!"

Hoshawk nodded as if he had known it all the time. "Sure. He has men in those planes. Live men who can observe and act independently. He's throwing hundreds of thousands of planes and submarine tractors and mobile bomb-throwers at us—all operated by men. And Forgacs himself is here, leading them. We're

whipped, Sire! Where is your civilization now?"

WADSWORTH was calm. He was taking it like a man, anyway. He threw a lever and poised at the great keyboard, then his mutant fingers began to work in blurred movement.

Hoshawk watched the screen above. The Atlantic filled with long trains of red lights that arose from their American bases and streamed eastward.

Hoshawk blinked. "You're firing everything. And you've locked the controls."

Wadsworth didn't look up. "In five minutes," he said, "there won't be an ounce of explosive left in any emplacement in America."

"But that's—" Hoshawk started to say "foolish," but he changed it. "That won't help, Sire. Forgacs' equipment is all over here, now."

But Wadsworth leaned back. Their golden explosive screen showed no longer on the Map. Already some of the emplacements had ceased to spew out red lights, and the tail-ends of their trains were disappearing to the east.

Hoshawk shuddered as he saw that now America was completely defenseless.

But Wadsworth spoke into his transmitter. "Radio. Give me special frequency three-hundred-eighty-one thousand, six hundred kilocycles. Clear all air-lines."

"Yes, sire."

The President pressed the scrambler button and then spoke. The words came out of the amplifier. "Three tons of butter unloaded a fast curve day before tomorrow because the baby was yelling for its morning high-ball. The soap-suds are thick enough for whipping but who knows where or when."

The President leaned back and smiled. "That's an order to all sixteen thousand mutants over the country to be on the alert at their predetermined stations."

Hoshawk frowned. "But everybody's been evacuated."

"Not the mutants. You see General, we ourselves haven't trusted Forgacs."

Hoshawk's grim face lighted up. "Do you mean you have secretly made some fighting equipment?"

Wadsworth shook his head. "No. We could have. There's a loophole in the

Twenty-one Eighteen Agreement. But we have observed the spirit—ah!”

Up on the ground-glass screen, purple lights had been flashing on at intervals over the United States, until now there were nineteen, and Wadsworth spoke: “Those represent transmitter stations equally spaced over the country. They are all manned by mutants.”

Hoshawk actually snorted. “Transmitter stations! You can’t fight with words! And, anyway, there won’t be any power at all within a half hour.”

“They each have their own power-plant,” The President said quietly.

Hoshawk looked at the map again and groaned. The nation was almost covered by a canopy of orange lights marked with black crosses. “There must be at least a million bombers over us! They’ll wipe out the whole country within an hour. If there’s anything you can do, *do it!*”

The President was pale, but he sat quietly. “Stalled,” Hoshawk thought sardonically. It took something besides smartness to win a war. It took character, too.

Wadsworth pointed to the American shores. Long lines of green and white and black and yellow dots coming from the sea, crawling in among the orange lights that swarmed over America like a gigantic swarm of hornets. “Submarines, amphibian battleships, flame-throwers, tanks,” he said.

Hoshawk stood erect. “If it were not against regulations, Sire, I would be tempted to blow my head off. We shall be destroyed as a people and as a continent.”

The President’s hands were clenched, but he answered slowly, “As a continent, perhaps. But the buildings can be built again. As a people—no, I don’t think so. As a civilization, I hope we can be saved.”

Hoshawk’s eyes narrowed. “How?” he demanded.

“Those purple lights represent sonic transmitters. In other words, generating stations for sound frequencies above the narrow band which can be heard by humans. They were developed, built, and financed by graduate mutants. They broadcast on different frequencies that we have determined most effective in upsetting the equilibrium of unstable chemical compounds.”

“Do you mean,” asked Hoshawk, “that you are going to try to detonate the explosives carried by Forgacs’ planes?”

“His planes, and anything else that carries them. We have analyzed samples of his explosives to determine the critical frequency of each. These nineteen stations cover the country. Any known explosive in the continental United States will be detonated when these stations go into operation.”

“What if Forgacs has some unknown explosive?”

Wadsworth was solemn. “We take that chance,” he said. “But the range of possible explosive combinations is well known, and something entirely different is unlikely. At any rate—”

“They’re starting to drop bombs!” Hoshawk said.

THE President watched the red glow around Kansas City. His face was taut. “There will be many cities destroyed,” he said. “But we must wait for all of Forgacs’ equipment to be within our continental limits. It must all be destroyed at once.”

“But the bombers are in action,” said Hoshawk. “Denver is getting it now.”

Wadsworth’s eyes were on the coastlines. “It will be twenty minutes at least before we can open the transmitters. We may lose most of our cities by that time, but there is nothing we can do.”

The red glows began to spread. Dallas and Fort Worth, New Orleans, Atlanta, Miami, San Diego and Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland and Seattle. The bombers were systematically destroying America’s population centers. And still Wadsworth waited. He sat tense before the Map, watching the endless stream of lights come from the sea.

But they were beginning to end. Many were far inland, attacking the smaller cities, cleaning up the big ones.

“The bombers won’t be destroyed,” said Hoshawk, “if they’ve already dropped their bombs.”

“I think they will, for all practical purposes,” said the President. “Their ammunition, their signal flares—everything explosive will be detonated.”

“How can you cover them all at once?”

“There are over nine hundred frequen-

cies—but we don't know that they will be enough," Jeffrey pointed out gravely. "We can only hope."

Hoshawk couldn't stand still any longer. He paced the floor before the Map. "Every city in America of more than a hundred thousand is gone—obliterated," he said tonelessly. "Can't we ever—"

"Wait!" The President was alert. "The last line of flame-throwers is coming on land." He pointed to the black dots streaming up on the west coast. He spoke into the audio transmitter. He didn't bother with the scrambler now. "Sonic stations on. Emergency force. Sonic stations on. Emergency force. Situation critical."

He pointed to the Map and sat back. Within a few seconds the purple lights began to flash intermittently.

"They're on," said the President. "But it will take a few minutes for them to reach full intensity. The sonic devices operate at high speeds—some at two hundred thousand r.p.m."

Hoshawk watched, almost without breathing. For the first time he was aware that the forty statesmen of the Western Hemisphere were watching through the glass windows of the Chamber.

At that instant purple glows began to surround the green lights, starting on the east coast of Florida and spreading upward.

"Amphibian submarines," whispered the President. "Their aerial torpedoes are exploding!"

"And up around the Great Lakes," said Hoshawk. "There it's amphibian tanks."

The President sat, and watched. The glows spread. They absorbed flame-throwers, tractors, mine-heavers. The Map of America was a clustered mass of lights, with the purple glow beginning to consume everything in its reach.

"The planes," said Jeffrey. "They're still untouched. They anticipated something like this." He barked into the microphone. "All stations, ascending frequency!" he ordered, and turned to Hoshawk. "We don't know how effective this will be. It isn't as powerful as the static ranges. But—"

"It is! They've got the range!" cried Hoshawk.

Jeffrey looked. Near Albuquerque, New Mexico, a cluster of orange lights was being consumed by the purple glow. Jeffrey shot a glance at a dial. "All stations! All stations! Frequency seventy-two thousand, nine eighty. Emergency. Frequency seventy-two thousand, nine eighty."

And the purple glow rolled and spread and consumed Forgacs' bombers by the thousands.

At last Wadsworth looked at the Map, with nothing left but the dead embers of a mighty army.

Hoshawk shook hands with him and then looked for a place to sit down for a moment. "Sire," he said at last, licking his lips with the tip of his tongue, "if it isn't presumptuous, I'd stand the check for a dish of that new ice cream."

Jeffrey looked at him and smiled. "You'd better have one yourself."

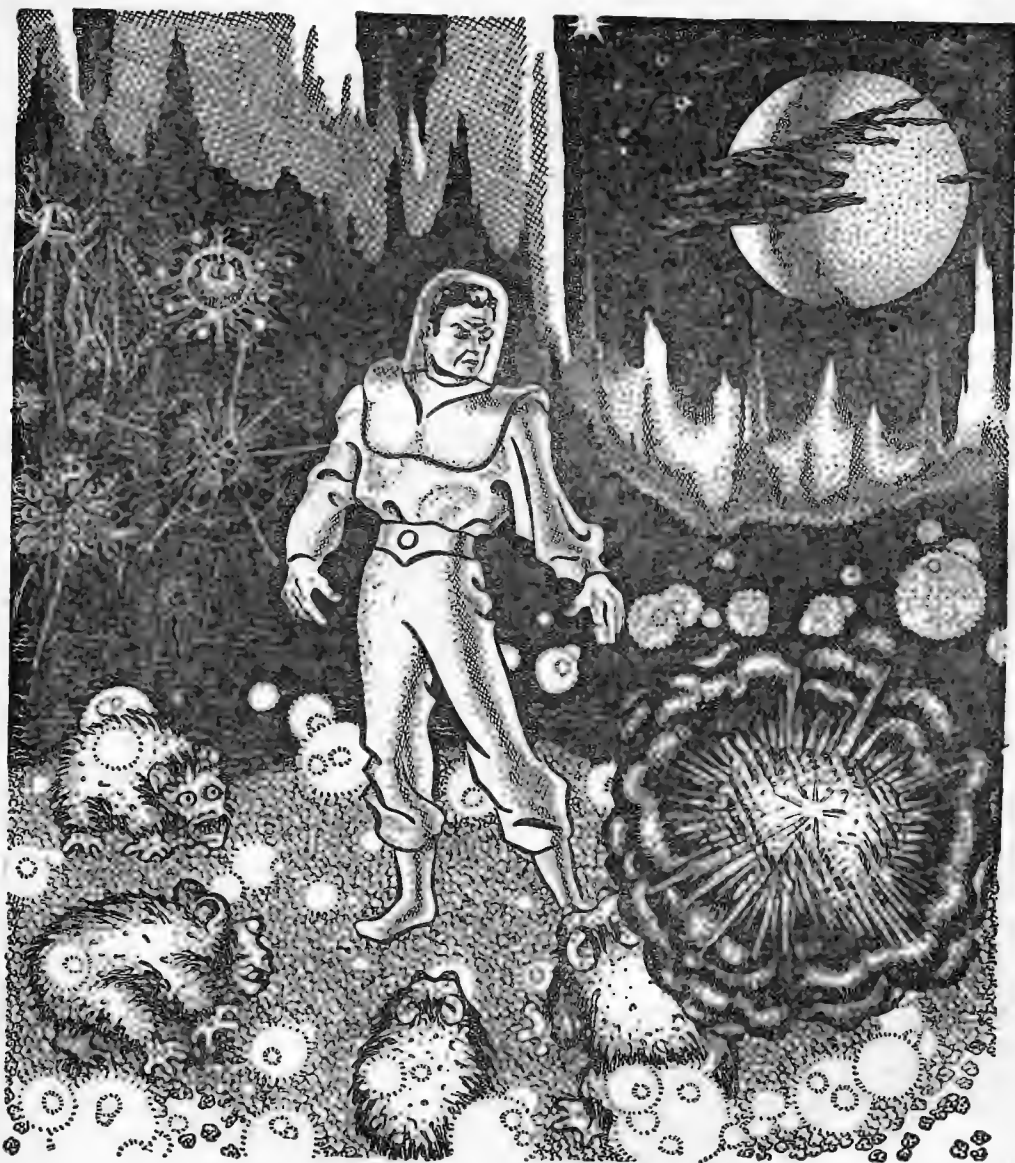
Hoshawk's grizzled face was solemn. "I'm going to," he said.



CRISIS ON TITAN

By JAMES R. ADAMS

What the devil! Was Captain Staley nuts? Here they were . . . no food, no water, about to be blasted out of existence by strange inhabitants of a weird planet—and Staley was making like a baseball player!



Illustrated by PETRIZZO

"HUT! Twuh, hree, foar. Hut!
Twuh, hree, foar. Hut!
Twuh—" Sergeant Hallihan
boomed forth the monotonous syllables with

unflinching precision, glaring from the
corner of his eye now and then in hopes
of catching some unfortunate fellow out of
step or whispering to a companion with

questionable reference to the sergeant.

The dust-caked ranks marched along quietly, carefully refraining from expressing their opinion of this disgusting detail, but Hallihan knew what they were thinking. And he could well understand their displeasure. These were hard-bitten, two-fisted, hell for leather I.P. men, and here they were with shovels and picks slung over their shoulders, plodding out to scratch in the dirt like common, dime-a-dozen ditch-diggers.

Hallihan felt as strongly about it as they, but orders were orders, and he prided himself on his ability to carry out a command, regardless of whether or not it conformed with his personal sentiments. This job had to be done, and the men all knew it could not be entrusted to a mob of imported flunkies. The *Squeakers* would make short work of such a motley crew.

The sergeant emitted a soft sigh between a snappy *twuh* and *hree* as his wandering gaze came to rest on the slow-moving grav-car, in which rode the brusque Captain Staley. The car skimmed along a foot or so above the ground, riding smoothly on its gravity-repellent ray. Hallihan suddenly became acutely aware of his aching feet. Would the captain never call a halt? Hell, they couldn't march straight through to the mine without rest. More than one soldier was dragging his feet, and the sergeant could hardly find the heart to snarl out his customary: "Get the lead out back there, soldier. Pep it up!"

Bringing up the rearguard of the orderly lines was as strange a group of "soldiers" as could be found on any moon of the system. These were the "Barber's Delights," an odd life-form of Titan that had formed a sort of aloof friendship with the Patrol from the moment it landed. The men jokingly called them Barber's Delights because of the thick, shaggy coat of hair that covered their log-like bodies. The B.D.'s either didn't understand, or just didn't care, for they made no objection to their nickname.

There were twenty of the creatures in this group, and more joined them along the way. They imitated the brisk step of the soldiers with amazing exactness, though they possessed no semblance whatsoever of feet. They moved on dense mats of stubby, resilient bristles that grew from

the flat bottoms of their column-bodies, sweeping forward like a horde of self-propelling brooms. Not wishing to be outdone by the visitors, they had their own sergeant, who moved along importantly at the side of his command, glaring threateningly from the corner of his single, huge eye. As Sergeant Hallihan called out his impeccable, "Hut! Twuh, hree, foar," Sergeant B. D. responded with, "Ungh! Ungh, ungh, ungh," the only sound he was capable of uttering. Hallihan scowled over his shoulder and snorted disgruntledly, fervently wishing he could get his heckler alone for a moment. His hard cot would have a new fur mattress that night.

Hallihan estimated they were half-way to the mine now. That huge deposit of *chroidex* salts was important to the system. Without the precious mineral space-flight would be impossible, since there would be nothing to protect travelers from deadly solar rays. The small amounts that had been found on Earth and the other major planets would soon give out, and Titan was the only other known source of *chroidex*. This deposit would last for centuries, and by the time it, too, was exhausted, perhaps engineers would have figured a way around the difficulty.

Captain Staley's car came to a stop and the tall man stepped out. He stood a moment, surveying the weary marchers with sharp, experienced eyes. He knew just how much he could get out of a man, knew when the limits of the human machine had been reached.

"You may rest your troops, Sergeant Hallihan," he said shortly.

HALLIHAN sighed inwardly, hoping for at least a twenty-minute surcease. He went through the formality of placing his men at ease, then strode anxiously to the captain's side.

"Do you suppose there will be trouble with the *Squeakers*, Sir?" he asked apprehensively. "They don't take to us, you know. They might ambush us at the mine."

The Captain thought a moment, then his thin lips drew up in a smile.

"I don't think they will. Their crude weapons wouldn't stand a chance against us, in force. Personally, I wish they would attack. Then we could do away with them once and for all. As it is, we can't risk

bringing laborers here to develop the mine. After the Squeakers picked off a few of them, the miners would turn tail and run for home. So we're temporarily stuck with both jobs, Sergeant; working the mine, and eliminating the Squeakers. We'll catch the whole damn bunch of them in the open some day. When we do . . ."

The two men momentarily forgot their conversation and turned to watch the antics of the perplexed B.D.s. The shaggy creatures were milling about uncertainly.

"Ungh ungh!" the log-shaped sergeant barked out, pointing a slim tentacle at the reclining I.P. men. "Ungh ungh!"

But the B.D.s were physically incapable of duplicating the soldiers' postures. Underneath all that hair, their bodies were not much more than wooden posts, stiff, erect, and not given to bending at the waist. The bristling sergeant might as well have saved his breath.

"If only the Squeakers were as friendly as these fellows," Captain Staley murmured. "But sadly, they don't have the least thing in common. Their hate for us is equaled, if not exceeded, by their fear of the B.D.s. Seems the B.D.s have some sort of racial disease that is fatal to the Squeakers if they come in contact with it. That's why you'll never see any members of these two races palling around together. Too bad the B.D.s aren't intelligent enough to cooperate with us. With their aid, we could wipe out the Squeakers in record time."

A strange occurrence was taking place in the ranks of the Barber's Delights. The exhausted sergeant had ceased his shouting, and the creatures stood about in stiff poses of inactivity. Suddenly a cloud of blue dust whooshed from the flat top of a barrel-like B.D. and the thing disappeared in a flurry of fur and smoke.

"Noon," Sergeant Hallihan said cryptically.

Others of the B.D.s were going through the same process. It was as if the ground had opened and swallowed them up. Hallihan's heckler blew out a great cloud of smoke and dwindled rapidly away to nothing. In one minute, the unconcerned group of half-animals was lessened by a third. The I.P. men sat with open mouths, craning their necks over companions' shoulders

to better witness the event. Although they had seen it many times in the past weeks, the weird exhibition never failed to impress them.

"Those things never miss," one soldier said in awe. "Come noon or midnight, and boom!—away they go, right on the dot. S'crazy."

Captain Staley smiled at the man and walked quickly to the spot where the B.D.s had disappeared, Sergeant Hallihan following. He bent to the ground and scooped up a handful of elliptical, waxy-surfaced seeds.

"Reproduction, man, reproduction," he said. "Their race, just as any other, would come to a quick end if they didn't propagate." He pointed to five B.D.s whose fur was slowly turning yellow and falling from their bodies in brittle patches. "In exactly half an hour, those creatures will be dead, and from these seeds will come new B.D.s to fill the gaps. By actual count, we know there are approximately five hundred of these beings on Titan. At noon and midnight, half of them reproduce, and the half that has already reproduced dies. Thus there are at all times exactly five hundred of the creatures, no more and no less. The disease germs that all of them carry, though fatal to the Squeakers, don't seem to have any ill effects on them. If they are injured, their bodies heal, no matter how deep the wound. So a B.D. lives his full half-day, Titan-reckoning, regardless of accidents and diseases. I would like to remain here and watch these seeds develop into full-grown B.D.s, but we must be getting on to the mine. We shall remain there a week, Sergeant, returning to the garrison at the end of that time for fresh supplies and equipment. Four or five grav-trucks and cranes would make the work much easier, but all of my requisitions to the government for these have been rejected on the grounds the Squeakers might stage an uprising and gain possession of valuable equipment. As I said, we'll have to struggle along as best we can until we can catch the Squeakers in a false move and blast them out of existence. Carry on, Sergeant."

Hallihan snapped to attention as the captain whirled on his heel and returned to his grav-car. Only fifteen minutes rest. Damn!

Under the direction of Hallihan's acid tongue, the men heaved reluctantly to their feet and fell into line, whispering curses as the sergeant roared out the hated, "F'rard, harch! Hut! Twuh, hree, foar."

"Ungh! Ungh, ungh ungh. Ungh! Ungh, ungh—" The B.D.s quickly appointed a new sergeant and took up the march with an eagerness that brought grunts of disgust from the begrimed men.

Hallihan glanced back over his shoulder to fix an icy stare on this new nemesis, and his eyes widened with amazement as he caught sight of a disheveled man stumbling along behind them, his arms waving frantically and his lips moving in a soundless yell. The sergeant called a quick halt and waited for the man to overtake them.

It was a soldier from the garrison. Blood trickled from his lips and one arm hung in a queer position at his side. The skin was hideously burnt and blackened where a heat-ray had caught him full in the face. Hallihan knew the man was dying as he collapsed in his arms, insanely babbling: "Managed to 'scape . . . got all rest, but managed to 'scape . . . must tell you, Serg'nt . . . must tell you . . . all rest dead. . . ."

STALEY'S car came to a jarring halt beside them and the alarmed captain jumped out, his emotionless features softening with pity as he saw the man's condition. The soldier was talking again, and Staley bent close to the mutilated mouth to catch all of the feeble words.

"All dead . . . all dead . . . Squeakers s'prised us 'n' took garrison . . . thousand Squeakers . . . thousand Squeakers in garrison . . . no chance . . . all dead . . ."

Captain Staley straightened, and his eyes were steely as he turned to Hallihan. He waited while Hallihan let the soldier gently to the ground and assigned a man to watch over him.

"It was a gross mistake to leave such a small complement of men at the garrison," Captain Staley said bitterly. "I seriously doubt that we can recapture it. If those creatures have enough intelligence to load and fire the four atomic cannons, our sidearms will be of little use. They'll slaughter us to the last man. But we've got to try, Sergeant. Understand? We've got to try."

"Yes, Sir." Hallihan saluted and turned, grim-lipped, to the waiting men. "We're returning to the garrison, men," he said simply. "'Bout face!"

The B.D.s scattered as the I.P. men plowed through them, but reformed behind the swift-moving columns and scurried anxiously after them. Another group of the curious creatures joined their fellows, swelling the ranks to fifty. They made a strange sight as they hustled along over the rocky ground, the dire-eyed sergeant belching out his eternal, "Ung! Ung, ungh, ugh. Ungh! Ungh, ungh—"

"If only those crazy bucket-heads would help us fight the Squeakers," Hallihan thought unhappily. "But they can't. They're just dumb mimics. They wouldn't know one end of a heat-ray from the other." Then he forgot about the B.D.s and started thinking about his shrieking feet.

They reached the garrison late in the afternoon, and Hallihan began displacing his men about the front of the structure, taking care they didn't expose themselves to the Squeakers' fire. In spite of their caution, five men were torn to shreds as an atomic cannon let go, catching them in the open. Hallihan swore harshly and ducked behind a huge boulder. Those dirty sons meant business.

The B.D.s followed suit, gliding behind upjuttings of rock and yelling one-syllable curses at the embattled garrison. They watched the proceedings with casually-interested eyes, emitting sympathetic "Unghs" whenever a patrolman fell. One of the creatures got his top blown off when he let it stick out too far from behind a rock, but he immediately grew a new one.

The I.P. men weren't faring so well. Most of the Squeakers' shots went wild, but the very intensity of their fire took its toll of the outnumbered patrolmen. Hallihan rushed about from rock to rock, patting his soldiers on the back and shouting words of encouragement in their ears. The B.D. sergeant hurried along behind him, whacking his tentacle across the furry bodies of his compatriots and keeping up a steady flow of loud, well-pleased "Unghs."

Captain Staley was doing his share of the fighting. He crouched behind a round boulder, snapping quick shots at the garrison and drawing back before the Squeakers could locate him. Sergeant Hallihan

flopped down beside him and lay staring questioningly at his superior.

"We can't win," Staley said, matter-of-factly. "The garrison was built to withstand just such a siege as this. We have to hit those loopholes in the wall dead-center to bring down a Squeaker. We couldn't have nailed more than half a dozen or so; half a dozen, out of a thousand. Attack from the rear is impossible, because of the steep canyon walls protecting the garrison on three sides. If we could rout them into the open, we could blast them down like cattle. There would be no escape, except through our ranks, and our sharpshooters would take care of any who broke through. But that's just wishful thinking, Sergeant. The Squeakers aren't stupid enough to try charging us. They'll stay holed up in the garrison, picking us off one by one. There's no place to run to. All of our food and water is in the hands of those devils, so we have our choice of fighting it out to the last man or retreating to the mine and wait for thirst and starvation to end our worries. What will it be, Sergeant?"

"We'll fight, Sir," Hallihan said grimly. "Yahoo! Pour it to 'em, men! Give 'em a taste of I.P. hell!"

Above the noise of battle could be heard the rat-like screeching of the Squeakers. The B.D.s answered with their version of the Bronx cheer, and between them and the ground-shaking c-r-rump-c-r-rump of the atomic cannons, the uproar was enough to cause a nervous breakdown in the staunchest habitue of Times Square.

NIGHT fell across the scene, and the battle raged on. The I.P. patrolmen now had a slight advantage, for the large bulk of the garrison was easily discernible in the dim light and they had the locations of the loopholes well-fixed in their minds. After each shot, they shifted positions, crawling over the ground so the Squeakers could not observe their movements. More than one unlucky fellow was found out, though, when a tall B.D. followed him, hurling challenges at the Squeakers in a loud, attention-drawing voice. This hindrance was temporarily done away with when midnight came and fully half of the B.D.s spouted blue smoke from their shaggy tops and dwindled away

to silent, waxy seeds. More of them lost their enthusiasm for the battle as their brown fur slowly took on a yellowish hue, and they retired to various dark crannies to sulk away their last few living moments.

"I have an idea, Sir," Hallihan reported excitedly to Captain Staley. "That armored grav-car of yours could easily gain the wall of the garrison without getting knocked out of commission, couldn't it? Well, here's the plan. We use the shovel handles to whip together a ladder long enough to scale the wall. Then me and a couple of the men speed through to the garrison in the grav-car and prop the ladder against the wall before the Squeakers can nail us. Maybe one or two of us will live long enough to get over the wall and open the gates. Then before the Squeakers catch wise, the rest of you charge through the gates and finish 'em off. What do you think, Sir?"

"I must commend you for your valor, Sergeant," Staley said soberly. "But I don't believe your plan would work. Even assuming that one of you would get through to the gates—and you must admit there would be small chance of that—the Squeakers would still be in possession of the cannons, and our men would be easy targets at such close range. We would only bring about our own defeat that much sooner. However, you *have* given me an



Captain Staley's arms snapped back like a baseball pitcher's.

idea, Sergeant. As you say, the grav-car *could* gain the garrison wall, and a man could stand outside with reasonable safety if he was careful not to move in line with a loophole. What is the time, Sergeant?"

"Why, er, five minutes past twelve, Sir—Titan-time."

"Good," Staley said determinedly. "I must put my plan into immediate operation. In ten minutes, Sergeant, my car will move toward the garrison. Instruct your men to direct a heavy fire at the loopholes until I have reached the wall. The more confusion, the better; anything that will draw the Squeakers' attention away from me. After that, well—Inform your men of the plan, Sergeant!"

Hallihan gulped and saluted. "Yes, Sir! That I'll do, Sir!" Cripes! Had the old man lost his marbles? One man against a thousand Squeakers! That was crazier than Hallihan's own idea! Nevertheless, the sergeant raced away to lay down the law to the sleepy-eyed soldiers.

Ten minutes later, Captain Staley's grav-car leaped from behind a boulder and bore down swiftly on the dark garrison. Instantly the patrolmen began howling and blasting at the garrison, drawing a murderous return fire from the mildly-surprised Squeakers. The few B.D.s who were still capable of it added their voices to the din, and Staley's car lurched to a halt at the garrison wall, completely undamaged. The Captain jumped out and fumbled inside the car a moment.

What the hell was he doing, Hallihan wondered. He watched the dark form move cautiously along the rampart and stop at a point where a good-sized upheaval in the ground raised him to within ten feet of the wall's top. The captain went through some strange motions. His hand dug in his pocket and then his arms snapped back like a baseball pitcher's. His hand flicked forward and came down to dig once more in his pocket. Again he went through the movements of throwing something. Hallihan scratched his head puzzledly, straining his eyes to see what Staley did next. That was all. Staley returned to his car and climbed inside, but the speedy little vehicle gave no indication of withdrawing from its position against the garrison wall.

Things quieted down a bit then, and Hallihan nearly went mad waiting for something to happen. Now and then an atomic cannon blasted out at the patrolmen, but the intensity of the Squeakers' fire had diminished considerably from that of earlier in the battle. They had plenty of time. They would wait until morning, when the sun exposed the hiding places of the I.P. men, then it would be curtains for these hated invaders from another world. Hallihan wished he could sleep, but he knew if he did he might never wake up again. He waited. . . .

A minute later, the sergeant's hair almost stood on end as a prolonged, hideous screech of terror beat against his ears, growing, swelling in intensity, and owning a note of stark, unreasoning fear. It came from the garrison; came from the throats of a thousand panicked Squeakers. Hallihan's jaw gaped ludicrously as the gates burst open and hundreds of screaming, scabbling, sleek-boiled Squeakers spilled into the clearing, fleeing from the garrison as fast as their skinny legs could carry them. Hallihan recovered quickly from his surprise and drew a bead on the leading Squeaker. The creature crumpled under the heat-beam, shrieking in agony as his fellows trampled over him, making pulp of his thrashing, charred body.

"Give 'em hell, boys!" Hallihan shouted exultantly. "Pour it to the rats!"

The I.P. patrolmen needed no coaxing. The terrified Squeakers were already falling by the dozens under their withering fire. The rodent-like animals hesitated, not knowing where to turn. Some of them ran to the canyon walls and tried to scramble up to safety, but the sharp-eyed soldiers nailed them before they could go a yard. An atomic cannon started banging away from the garrison, and Hallihan knew Captain Staley had plunged his grav-car through the open gates and taken over one of the deadly guns. After that, it was only a question of mopping up. . . .

WHEN morning came, the canyon floor looked like an inverted graveyard. Blackened, torn bodies, all that remained of the Squeakers, littered the clearing. Weary patrolmen emerged from behind the protecting boulders, moving warily, lest some of the creatures were



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playing possum. But the repulsive animals were quite dead.

"Not more than a dozen got away," Hallihan said, satisfaction, his voice. "They were scared to come through our lines with those B.D.s hangin' around. The ones that did get through will probably die of that strange disease the shag-gies carry in their fur. Let's find out about Captain Staley, men."

Staley was waiting for them when they entered the garrison. And so were fifty Barber's Delights! Staley smiled when he saw the question on Hallihan's beefy face. Hallihan recovered enough to salute.

"Everything went well, I trust, Sergeant?" Staley asked.

"Yeah. I mean, yes, Sir. We really cleaned up on those devils. We won't have to worry about them any longer. They come out of here like bats outta hell. How'd they come to blow their tops, Captain?"

"We have the B.D.s to thank for that," Staley said, fondly patting one of the log-bodied creatures on the back.

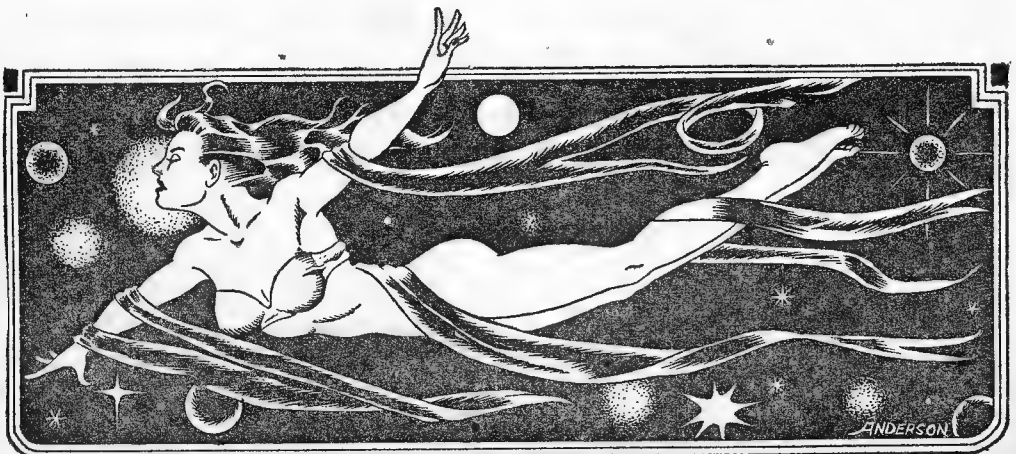
"I don't see why, Sir," Hallihan said skeptically. "We all know the things ain't got brains enough to fight. Anyway, how in all creation did they get in here? They—" The sergeant stopped abruptly. He clapped a hand to his forehead in feigned exasperation and snorted disgustedly. "Cripes, I'm stupid! I mean, I think I understand now, Sir. You had me wondering, though. I thought you'd cracked up under the strain when you

started goin' through them crazy shenanigans in front of the wall. I guess I ought to apologize, Sir."

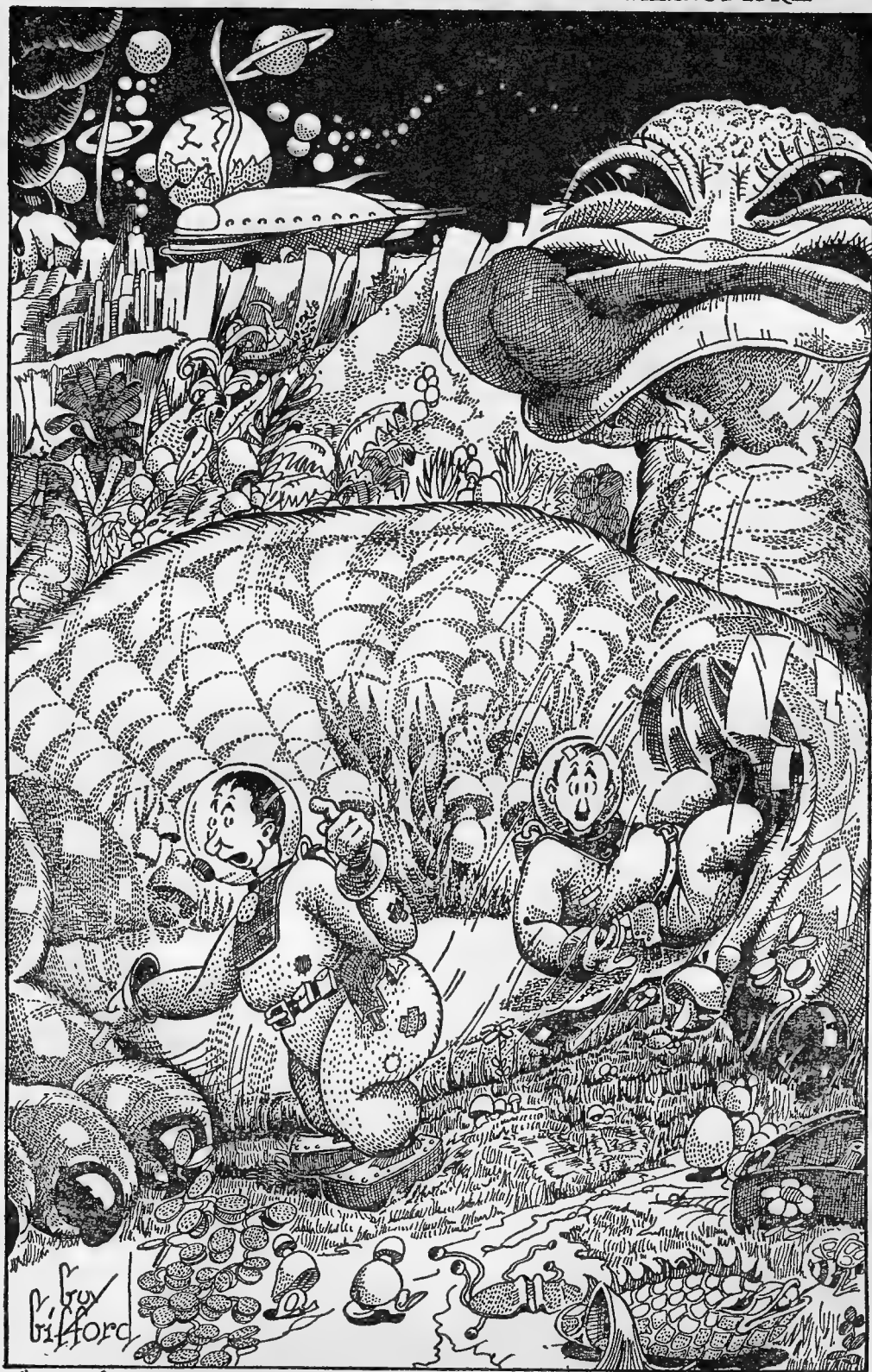
"No need, Sergeant. I suppose it did seem as if I had gone mad. But I knew our only chance to beat the Squeakers was to get them into the open, and the only way to do that was to inspire great fear in them. The only thing the Squeakers feared was the Barber's Delights, because of the fatal disease they bear in their fur. But obviously, I couldn't induce these dumb creatures to storm the garrison and force the Squeakers into the open. Then I remembered the seeds. The B.D.s' seeds certainly couldn't object if I carried them to the garrison wall and tossed them inside. That is exactly what I did. All there was to do then was wait until the seeds blossomed into full-grown B.D.s and stampeded the Squeakers right into our hands. The Squeakers poor marksmanship was no match for ours. I believe our work is done here, Sergeant. Experienced miners can take over the job now."

"Yes, Sir!" Hallihan grinned broadly. "The men will be glad to hear that, Sir. But first, we've got a bit of a mess to clean up. Hold on to them shovels, men, you ain't through diggin' yet. Lively, now!"

"Ungh ungh!" a new B.D. sergeant took up the cry, glaring balefully at his fellows. The obedient creatures scooted quickly after the soldiers. Just dumb mimics, but they had saved spaceflight from an early end.



THE RINGERS EXPLORE THE PLANET "HELLS'ACRE"



"PA! COME QUICK! I'VE MADE A DISCOVERY!!
THIS CREATURE IS TRANSPARENT!!"

THE BLUE VENUS

By EMMETT McDOWELL

Out of their mountain hideout came the terrified band of The Renegade. Through the valleys of Venus they swept, seeking a greed-maddened slaver who planned an experiment so cruel and barbaric it would destroy the very foundation of mankind.

THE hooded figure of a man detached itself from the shadows beside the door, paused, listening. Nothing stirred. The huge sprawling plantation house was silent and yet alive with the feel of sleepers.

Then from below stairs, he heard a door slam. The tinkle of laughter ascended to his ears. He crouched. His hand slipped inside his coat, fondled the slug gun nestling in its shoulder holster. The voices drifted out of hearing. Uneasy silence settled back over the plantation house.

The hooded man let his breath escape between his teeth. He slid back the door, passed inside like a shadow, shut the door behind him.

The room which he'd entered was lit by the intense, green radiations from the Venusian vegetation. The cold phosphorescent light streamed through the open windows, glinted from a glassite desk, soft flexoglas lounging chairs and sofa. It was the typical office from which the plantation owners directed the affairs of their feudal estates.

As silent as a night hawk, the hooded man drifted to the wall, ran his fingertips over the wood paneling. There was a faint click. The panel slid back revealing a wall safe.

A needle ray of light streamed suddenly from the hooded man's hand, splashed off a paper which he'd drawn from his pocket. He checked the string of figures printed there, returned the paper to his pocket. He worked swiftly, surely. Then with a sigh of satisfaction he swung back the heavy door.

There was a faint thump in the corridor

outside the office that broke the silence.

The hooded man snapped erect, the compressed air slug gun in his hand. He was sharply conscious of the hum of Venusian night life outside the windows. The room felt sticky, close. His hand was damp with sweat about the pommel of the slug gun.

He waited five minutes, ten minutes without moving, but the noise was not repeated.

He drew a breath, set to examining the papers in the safe by the aid of the midget flash. Most of them he put back carefully, just as they'd been, but two packets he stuffed into an inside coat pocket. He closed the door, spun the dial. He heard a sharp click behind him, leaped around.

At the same instant, the room was flooded with bright white light.

"Please don't!" said a girl's voice.

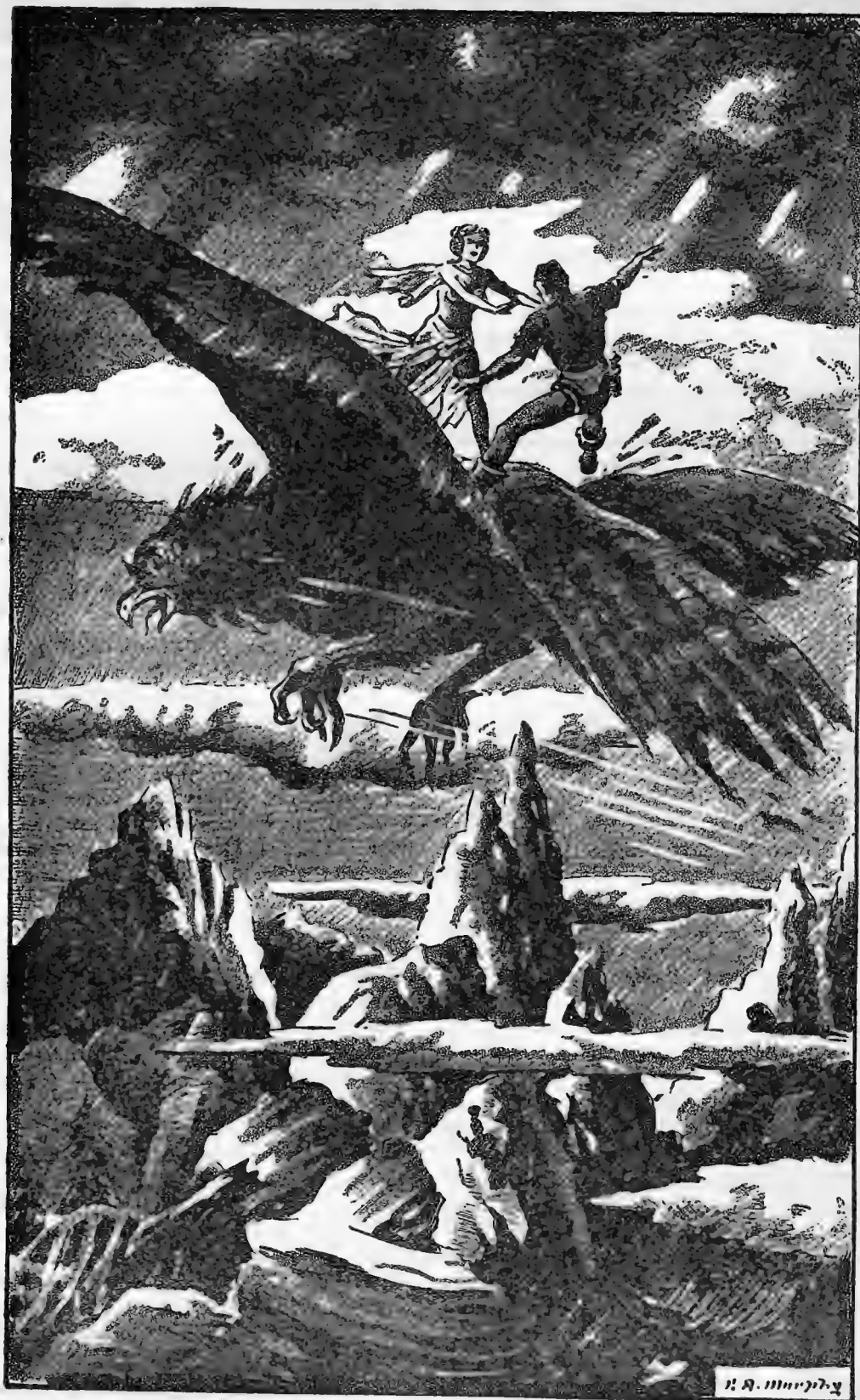
The hooded man arrested his hand halfway to his shoulder holster.

A startlingly beautiful girl, he saw, was standing in the doorway to the corridor covering him with a wicked dart gun. She was a tall girl with the yellowest hair he'd ever seen. She wore a spun glass negligee and her skin was blue. It was the pastel blue of a Terran dawn flushed with rose.

She came all the way inside, slid shut the door.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Why don't you turn in the alarm?" said the hooded man dryly. The poisoned needle gun was sending goose flesh quivering up his spine. A scratch would be fatal. His jaw tightened beneath the hood. His eyes were hard green discs, the dangerous eyes of a hunted man.



Illustrated by MURPHY.

"Oh no." The blue girl's voice was low. "I wouldn't do that. I'd never be able to get the safe open by myself."

"What?"

"I want you to open the safe for me."

THE hooded man didn't reply for a moment. At length, he asked: "What then?"

The girl giggled. "I take what I want, and you take what you want," she explained naively. "See. And you'll be blamed for taking it all. Only you're going to be disappointed!"

"Disappointed? How?" He took a step toward her.

"Bemmelman never keeps his money on the plantation. It's all at Venusport. There aren't fifty monad in the safe."

"Maybe I'm not after money." He took a second step, his green eyes opaque.

She looked at him intently, made a thin gasping noise. "You're the Renegade!" The dart gun trembled in her small blue fist. "Oh my God! I didn't guess. You're the Renegade!"

Without affirming or denying the statement, he asked, "What do you want from the safe?" and took a third step.

"Don't come any closer! I'm a very good shot. See!"

The little gun went spat. The hooded man heard the dart whisper past his ear, thunk into the paneling behind him. His stomach felt suddenly hollow.

"My dear girl," he said dryly; "if you do that again, I won't be able to open a book, let alone that safe. I'm a mass of jelly now."

"Then you will open it for me?"

"What is it you want?"

"Evidence!" Impulsively she took a step toward him, allowed the dart gun to waver out of line. "Evidence to send Bemmelman to the disintegration chamber!"

The hooded man felt appalled at the sheer animal hate in her violet eyes. Her skin was too light for her to be a full blooded Jovian primitive. She must be a cross. He mentally snapped his fingers. That was it, of course. The Blue Venus! The slave for whom Hal Bemmelman was asking five thousand monad on the Venusian Slave Mart. He said:

"You aren't overly fond of Bemmelman?"

"I loathe him!" With a savage jerk, she yanked her white negligee down from her left shoulder. "See that?"

He saw a scar on the pale blue skin above her breast. It was the shape of a fern leaf and he could have covered it with his thumb.

"Branded!" she spat. "My father was a Jovian Dawn Man—an animal! But my mother was an Earth woman. Hal Bemmelman kidnapped her!"

The hooded man regarded her pityingly. She was only a kid, he realized. He said:

"You can't get Bemmelman like that. He runs the government at Venusport. He'd never come to trial." He stopped, realizing that she wasn't listening.

Nostrils flaring, head erect, the girl was looking through him blankly. A glimmer of fright flitted across her mobile features. Then she raised the dart gun, pointed it full at his chest.

"Put your hands on top of your head, please!"

His green eyes contracted angrily. He didn't move.

"I mean it! Put your hands on top of your head, please."

With a shrug, he obeyed. He saw the door to the corridor slide back. A heavy red faced man in his late forties and a wrinkled snuff brown suit stared in at them. The red faced man's sparse sandy hair was plastered to his skull, and he had little mobile brown eyes like a pig.

"Is that you, Hal?" The blue girl didn't turn around, didn't take her eyes off the hooded man. "I've caught the Renegade!"

The red faced man's jaw dropped. "Yes sir," he said. "Yes sir, it's me, Sofi." A shrewd gleam flickered in his pig-like eyes.

"I caught him trying to open the safe."

"So I see! So I see!" Bemmelman rubbed his hands together, came into the room. He pulled a dart gun from the belly band of his trousers and leveled it at the Renegade. "Stand aside, Sofi."

The hooded man felt his stomach turn slowly upside down. He considered hurling himself behind the glassite desk, snatching out his slug gun.

Bemmelman said: "Did you get his gun, Sofi?"

She shook her yellow head.

Alarm stiffened the planter's features. "Get it, girl! No! No! Don't get between us! Get behind him!"

The hooded man felt the girl's hands pat his chest, draw forth the heavy slug gun.

The florid color crept back into Bemmelman's gross features. "You may go, Sofi. I want a word with the Renegade."

SOFI shot him a child-like pouting glance, but retreated obediently from the room, drawing the door shut behind her.

The lean young man in the hood watched, weighing his chances. He didn't say anything.

"You're surprised, eh, that I don't turn you in to the Security Patrol?" Bemmelman began. "They'd like to get their hands on the Renegade, they would. But the fact is I want you more than they do. Yes sir, this is a piece of luck for me. I've been trying to contact you for months."

The hooded man said dryly: "I'm listening," and allowed his hands to sink to his side.

"Put your hands back on your head!" Bemmelman's voice registered alarm. "No tricks. I can use you, lad, but no tricks." He glared speculatively at the Renegade, added: "Yes sir, that I can. And now, if you'll take off that hood we'll get down to business."

"If it's business, I'll keep the hood on."

"No sir," the planter blustered. "Off with the hood or I shoot. When I do business with a man, I like to know who he is."

The hooded man's green eyes were reckless. The law on Venus was harsh, implacable. There were no pardons. The disintegration chamber at Venusport yawned for him inexorably.

"You know, Bemmelman, I'd be completely at your mercy if I unmasked?"

"You are right now. Yes sir. You can take it off alive, or I'll take it off of you dead."

The hooded man was half crouched against the glassite desk. He said softly: "You don't leave me much choice," and dived beneath the dart gun.

His head struck the slave breeder's paunch like a cannon ball. Bemmelman went, "Ooof!" sat down with a thud. The

dart gun spat a needle into the ceiling where it quivered viciously.

The hooded man was on him like a cat. One swipe of his hand knocked the dart gun clattering under the sofa. Purple faced, gasping Bemmelman scrambled to his feet. A look of fright swept his gross features, and he began stabbing a button on the glassite desk.

The hooded man could hear the shrill clamor of alarm bells pealing through the rambling building. He leaped for the door, threw it back.

"Ahhh!" he said.

Sofi stood in the entrance, her dart gun almost against his chest.

Like a whip, the hooded man twisted sideways, snatched the gun from the startled girl. He saw Bemmelman charging across the room. He grinned, shoved the girl into the planter's arms, slammed the door.

The sound of shouts drifted up to him. He saw a Venusian serf, armed with a bell muzzled ray rifle, dash into the corridor. The serf caught sight of him. A yellow ray streamed from the gun, splashed off the wall; but the hooded man already had vanished up the stairs.

Bemmelman burst from the office. "Which way did he go? The force screens are up! He can't escape!"

"He got in," Sofi pointed out coolly.

Half a dozen armed serfs dashed into the hall. The alarm bells were still ringing.

"Which way?" Bemmelman roared.

The serf said: "Up."

"We've got him. That leads to the roof. He can't get off!" He charged the steps followed by the pack of Venusians.

At the room Bemmelman paused, shoved up the trap. With considerable respect for his own skin, he ordered one of the serfs through first.

"Careful," he advised. "The man's desperate."

The serf climbed fatalistically onto the roof, turned around and around.

"He's not here."

"Impossible!" The planter roared and squeezed his bulk through the opening.

The green phosphorescent glow of the vegetation lit the flat roof eerily. A raucous screech from some night flying bird floated down from the cloud mass overhead.

There was no plane, no sign of a plane; but the man with the hood was gone.

II

MIA MacIVER tried to concentrate on her head overseer's report. She felt hot and sticky and the figures ran together, didn't make sense. Moreover, the delicate notes of a flute kept scattering her thoughts. They came through the casement window from the patio outside her study.

"Damn," said Mia MacIver and wriggled at her desk.

She was barefooted, clad only in a short yellow tunic, but she felt as if she were locked in a steam bath. She'd never get used to Venus, she supposed, to its turkish bath atmosphere, its lush phosphorescent vegetation, its ridiculous mingling of periods, Paleozoic, Mesozoic, and the glass age all flourishing together. The Pan-like notes continued to assail her ears from outside the study.

She wrinkled her nose, wiped a trickle of sweat from the end. In despair, she flipped on the Newscaster.

The features of a plump young man flashed on the screen.

"Last night," his voice came through the audio, "the plantation of Councilor Bemmelman was raided by the Renegade. Luckily, he was discovered immediately and the Security Patrol notified. But as usual the Renegade had vanished without a trace."

Mia MacIver snapped to attention. It was absurd, she felt with a surge of anger that a man could make fools of the Venusian authorities as the Renegade had done for years.

She knew little of Venus. Her life had been spent in boarding schools on Earth. But when she'd received news that her father was dead, murdered by the Renegade, she'd booked passage to Venusport at once, determined to manage the plantation herself.

"Here's a special bulletin," the announcer was saying. "The plantation owners are subscribing ten thousand monads to be added to the price already on the Renegade's head. That makes a total of fifty thousand monads for his capture. A punitive expedition is also being

organized against his headquarters in the Cloud Mountains."

Mia MacIver switched off the Newscaster, stood up. The notes of the pipes drifted into her study, exotic, compelling. She bit her lip, stepped through the window onto the vine roofed patio.

"Stop that noise, Cosmo! You're driving me insane!"

Cosmo Horn took the Venusian pipes from his mouth, said dryly, "I didn't think I was that bad."

He was sprawled in a hammock, looking like a handsome, rather distinguished tramp.

"Did you hear the Newscaster, Cosmo?"

"No." He shook his head. He had a lean, hawk-like visage, close cropped brown hair, green eyes.

"The Renegade was at the Bemmelman plantation last night!"

"Sure enough?"

Cosmo sat up, put the reeds in his pocket. He was wearing only coat and trousers. The brown triangle of hair on his chest extended in a thin line down his flat belly. "How much did he nick that dealer in flesh for?"

"Nothing." They scared him off before he had a chance to take anything. Cosmo, why can't they catch him?"

"No one's seen him without his hood. They don't know who he is; they don't know where to look, or what to look for."

"Oh Earth . . ." began Mia.

"On Earth there wouldn't be a Renegade," interrupted Cosmo dryly. "Earth is unified. It isn't split up into hundreds of independent countries like Venus. They don't have slavery or serfdom or the feudal system on Earth. Men aren't driven into outlawry. . . ."

"Driven!" said Mia in a heated voice. "What makes you think he was driven? I'd say he was doing exactly as he pleased."

Cosmo stood up, towering over the girl, took several short paces across the patio.

"I don't think anyone would enjoy being constantly hunted. Everyman's hand against him. Always on guard against treachery, surprise. And no matter how careful he is, sooner or later he's bound to be caught. He can't even quit, now. I feel sorry for him."

"Feel sorry for him! I'd like to see him shot!"



COSMO looked startled. "You're a blood thirsty little devil." He grinned suddenly. "What I've been saying must have buzzed in one ear and out the other."

Mia said: "He murdered father."

Cosmo regarded her in surprise. "Great guns, Mia, where did you get that idea?"

"Hal Bemmelman told me. He found father down in the tara field where . . ." Her voice faltered, but she recovered herself, went on. "Where the serfs had hacked him to pieces with grass knives. They were the Renegade's men."

"Did he? Did he indeed?" Cosmo's voice was grim. "What was Bemmelman doing there?"

Mia frowned. "He was trailing a runaway serf. Why?"

"Of course, he was." Her gray eyes widened. She stared at him. "Surely you aren't accusing Bemmelman of murdering father. Why he's the most influential member of the Council of Land Owners. He's . . ."

"Did you ever hear of the Blue Venus?" he interrupted.

"The Blue Venus? What's that?"

Cosmo's face was grim, his green eyes cold. "She's a cross between a Jovian Dawn Man and an Earth woman. She's supposed to be the most beautiful girl in the System. She belongs to Bemmelman. He forced her mother to mate with a Jovian primitive as an experiment. He's asking five thousand monad for her on the Slave Mart. Hal Bemmelman is a slave breeder."

"I don't believe it!" Mia said in horror, then asked with feminine perversity: "How do you know?"

Cosmo sat down in the hammock, grinned faintly. "I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone but your father, Mia. I think you ought to know, because you're in danger." His green eyes twinkled. "Quit chewing your fingernails."

"Go on," said Mia. "Go on, for the Lord's sake, before I burst."

He said: "Twenty-six years ago my father owned the Bemmelman plantation. He was murdered under almost the same circumstances as your father. So was my mother. My nurse escaped with me, hid me out in the mountains. I was only five."

"Who did it?"

"Jovian Dawn Men. Slaves imported from Jupiter. They run amok during their rutting season, you know, and they were supposed to be amok at the time."

"But . . ." began Mia.

"Wait a moment. Bemmelman held notes on the plantation. He moved in. But before Bemmelman took over our plantation, he was a slave runner. He imported Dawn Men from Jupiter for the Venusian Slave Mart."

"You—you think Hal Bemmelman was in back of it?"

"Yes," he said flatly.

"But why? Couldn't he buy land?"

"No," said Cosmo, "he couldn't. Land here is entailed. It stays in the same family from generation to generation. Mu is one of the few countries on Venus where Terrans have been able to settle at all. Bemmelman's only chance was to have my people murdered and forge notes."

"Does he know who you are?"

Cosmo nodded. "He's tried to have me assassinated several times," he said indifferently.

Mia swallowed. "You—you said I was in danger."

"Doesn't it strike you there's a great deal of similarity between your case and mine. Your father has been murdered, supposedly by the Renegade. It looks like Bemmelman is getting ready to expand."

"He—he wouldn't kill me!" said Mia indignantly. "Would he?"

"No," said Cosmo, a smile quirking the corners of his wide, grim-lipped mouth. His lean, narrow jaw and thin, hooked nose gave him a saturnine cast. "But I wouldn't put it past him to kidnap you. Remember the Blue Venus. I happen to know Bemmelman's been anxious to repeat that experiment, but a beautiful Terran girl is hard to get."

She shivered slightly, said: "That's preposterous! He wouldn't dare! Would he?"

But Cosmo had leaped to his feet. "There's a plane coming!" he said in an edgy voice.

A surface flying car flashed to the edge of the patio, stopped, settled to the ground. The extreme altitude of the bullet-shaped vehicle was under three hundred feet, Cosmo knew. But even that height was impractical for flight on Venus, roofed as

the planet was by the low, swirling cloud blanket. As a rule, the planes barely skimmed the surface.

A door in the monoloid hull swung open. A heavy set man got out.

"Why it's Hal Bemmelman," exclaimed Mia. "What does he want?"

"Speak of the devil," drawled Cosmo.

BEMMELMAN strode across the patio, his eyes on Cosmo, said in a disagreeable voice: "If it isn't the fortieth-century troubadour."

Cosmo's features set blankly. He didn't reply.

"Mia," Bemmelman took both the girl's hands in his big paws. "I've bad news. Yes sir, very bad news. Three of my serfs ganged my second overseer, chopped him to pieces with grass knives."

"What?" Mia's eyes dilated in horror.

"They got him from behind, I guess. Then they broke into the arsenal. They're armed, Mia, and heading this way. I dropped everything to fly over and warn you."

"Coming this way?" Mia firmly disengaged her hands. "But why?"

"They're trying to reach the Cloud Mountains and join the Renegade. Your place lies directly between mine and the mountains."

"The Renegade!" Mia's level gray eyes frosted with hate. "The rurals can't catch him. He makes monkeys out of the Security Patrol. What is he? A wizard?"

"You've heard the news?" Bemmelman interrupted. "The Renegade was at my place last night. I've been worried about you, Mia, alone here on the edge of the mountains. Yes sir, I came to take you to my plantation until we have these murderous serfs behind bars."

"But I'm quite safe. I—I . . ."

"This isn't Earth, Mia," he said in a silky voice. "I haven't much time. No sir. I must return to organize the pursuit. We'll teach those brutes a lesson they won't soon forget."

"If you catch them," put in Cosmo in an amused voice.

"We'll catch them!" Bemmelman turned his small, brown, pig-like eyes on Cosmo. "Yes sir, and the Renegade, too."

Mia said with a grimace: "Thanks, Hal, but I'm not coming."

Bemmelman lowered his head like a bull. "I haven't the men to spare to guard you, even if I could trust them. I was too good a friend of your father's, Mia, to leave you here with those three murderers roaming in the neighborhood. You're coming with me."

Cosmo, observing quietly, frowned to himself. What was the planter trying to pull?

"I'm not," said Mia indignantly. "Really this is preposterous. It's . . ."

Bemmelman glared at her, seized her arm. "Girl, don't be a fool. If those runaways show up here, they'd chop you to pieces. Come along." Unceremoniously, he began to drag her toward his plane.

"Cosmo!" Mia's gray eyes snapped open like saucers.

Cosmo's hand fell on Bemmelman's shoulder, spun him around.

"You heard Miss MacIver." Two rouge-like spots sprang out on Cosmo's high cheek bones. His green eyes were opaque.

"Get your dirty paws off me!" Bemmelman roared in surprise. He almost choked with rage. "By Jupiter! I'll teach you a lesson you won't soon forget! Yes sir!"

With a growl, the red-faced planter lashed out with his fist. The blow struck Cosmo on his right cheek bone, snapped back his head.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Cosmo. He turned loose Bemmelman's shoulder.

The planter swung again wildly. Cosmo slipped the blow. With a straight left, he knocked Bemmelman down.

The planter shook his head. There was a surprised look on his beefy red features. Sinking his head in his bull neck, he scrambled to his feet.

Cosmo knocked him down again.

Bemmelman turned his brown pig-like eyes up to Cosmo. He tried to rise. Cosmo knocked him down for the third time.

He said: "Bemmelman, get out of here. If you ever lay hands to me again, I'll kill you."

The planter heaved himself to his feet, lip drooling blood. He crossed to his surface plane, scrambled inside. Then he shook his fist at Cosmo.

"I'll get you for this, Horn. You haven't MacIver to protect you now. I'll get you."

Cosmo took a step toward the plane.

Bemmelman hastily slammed the door. The vehicle swooped from the ground, sped away like a silver bullet.

"He will," said Mia in a small voice. "You shouldn't have done that, Cosmo. He's powerful. He controls the Council of Land Owners."

"He struck me," Cosmo's lean features were like clay. "If he does it again, I'll kill him."

Mia shivered. "Do you always get so violent?"

"He hit me," said Cosmo. "I should have killed him."

All at once Mia said: "Cosmo!" in a strained, frightened voice.

He flicked a glance past the startled girl, stiffened in alarm. At the edge of the patio, three men stood in a silent group.

One, he saw, was a serf. Naked to the waist, the Venusian was darker, squatter than the Fozoqls, the killer caste of Venus. But he had the same venomous green eyes. A grass knife was thrust through his sash, and he held a ray rifle at a menacing angle.

It was the second figure, though, that took his breath away. A huge, naked, blue giant. His only weapon was a club.

"A Jovian Dawn Man!" said Mia in a stifled voice.

Cosmo felt his palms dampen. The terrific gravity of Jupiter endowed the Jovian primitives with superhuman strength. Normally, they were docile creatures and highly prized among the Venusians as slaves because of their terrible strength and weird beauty. The Dawn Man faced them now, nostrils flaring as he tested their scent. He was handsome as a matinee idol. But somewhere the Jovians had run into an evolutionary blind pocket. They would never evolve into true men. They were animals.

Cosmo scarcely noted the third member of the group, the short barrel-shaped Mercurian. He stood a little apart, smiling blandly and quietly like an inscrutable Buddha.

"Look at the scars on their shoulders," Mia whispered hoarsely. "The fern leaf!

That's Bemmelman's brand. They're the runaways!"

The Venusian raised his rifle. His green eyes burned with hate for the Earthlings.

Mia shrank toward Cosmo. "He—he's. . ."

"Put down your rifle," said Cosmo in the Venusian dialect of Mu. He could feel the pulse beat in his ears; his lips felt dry. "Seek you the Renegade?"

The Venusian hesitated, indecision reflected in his dark-yellow features. The Dawn Man shook his club, growled deep in his chest. Muscles rippled like hawsers beneath his blue hide.

"Most certainly." It was the Mercurian who spoke.

Cosmo glanced at him sharply, realized that behind the Mercurian's smiling mask, he was violently distressed. Mercurians didn't approve of bloodshed, he recalled.

Sweat dappled Cosmo's forehead. Then, with a faint shrug, he made a peculiar gesture with his hand.

An expression of wonder and comprehension filled their faces. Only the blue giant continued to rumble deep in his chest.

"The Renegade!" cried the fat Mercurian, and his yellow eyes twinkled with relief. He plumped on his knees, repeated the cabalistic symbol.

With only a moment's hesitation the serf followed suit. "Down, you big ox!" he shouted at the Jovian and thwacked him behind the knees with his ray rifle. "Down! That's the Renegade!"

III

MIA MACIVER stared at Cosmo in disbelief. "You—you're not the Renegade! I don't believe it."

"It's lucky for you, I am," he said dryly.

She held her hands straight down at her side, small fists clenched. "Lucky? Father thought you were his friend and you killed him. I'd rather be dead than owe you anything."

"Listen, Mia, get this straight. I didn't kill your father."

"Of course, you'd say that." Her chin trembled; she set her jaw stubbornly. "Who'd believe the Renegade?"

Cosmo made a weary gesture, turned back to the runaways who'd been listening with interest.

"Get off your knees," he said. His tone was embarrassed. "The Security Patrol is scouring the countryside for you right now. Take to the forest where the planes can't follow. Make for the mountains. My men. . ."

"By Nemi!" the Buddha-faced Mercurian ejaculated suddenly. He pointed at Mia who was slipping through the window to her study. "The girl is escaping. After her, Tong!"

The Venusian serf leaped in pursuit, but Cosmo halted him with a lifted hand. "She won't go far." He turned back to the Mercurian. "I give the orders," he said.

The moon-faced little man bowed good-naturedly. Cosmo realized he wasn't even armed.

"What are you doing with this pair of cut-throats?" he asked.

"We understand one another," the Mercurian replied blandly. "I act as a governor. My presence restrains them from indulging in an excess of blood letting."

"Who sent you to me?" Cosmo asked shrewdly. "Was it Penang-ih tok?"

The Mercurian shuddered. "Yes. A violent man, that Penang-ih tok. An out-cast Fozoql."

"He's safe then?" Cosmo interrupted. "Bemmelman doesn't suspect him?"

"No."

"Good." He frowned, said: "Go now. Your time is short."

Without a word the odd trio filed off. Cosmo watched them around the corner of the plantation house, then sprang through the window of Mia's study.

The girl was at the telecast. She had tuned in the fat Commissioner of the Security Patrol.

"What?" the Commissioner's voice rumbled from the audio. His jowls were shaking; his image wildly agitated. "Are you sure, Owner MacIver? The Renegade at your plantation with the serfs from the Bemmelman place?"

Without waiting for an answer, he turned away from the Visoscreen, but Cosmo could still hear his voice shouting orders at some underling.

"Contact the radio patrol planes! Or-

der them to converge on the MacIver plantation! The Renegade! Good Lord, man, d'ya realize what a feather it'll be in our caps? Hurry!"

The fat Commissioner swung back into the visoscreen. "I'll have a dozen patrol planes there in ten minutes. What does he look like, Owner MacIver? Who is he?"

"He is . . ." began Mia, then discovered Cosmo standing beside the boxlike transmitter on the wall. He flashed her a faintly wolfish grin.

MIA gasped, brought her hand to her throat. Her high firm breasts heaved wildly beneath the yellow tunic.

"What's wrong, Owner MacIver? What's wrong?" came the excited voice from the audio.

Mia's wide gray eyes brimmed with hate.

"He is . . ." she began again, but the screen went dead. Cosmo had yanked the transmitter from the wall. Wires like tentacles dangled from the back of the box. He dropped it to the gray straw matting.

"That won't help!" Mia's voice was triumphant as she backed away. "You can't escape. They'll come from all directions."

Again Cosmo grinned. He jumped, seized Mia, swung her off her feet.

"Let me go!"

"You're coming with me." His voice was grim. "I'd rather the Commissioner didn't find out I'm the Renegade just yet."

"Put me down! Are you mad?" Mia's long, bare legs thrashed wildly. She hammered at his chest. "You can't escape by yourself, let alone with me."

He calmly pinioned her flailing legs, strode out the window to the edge of the patio. Dropping her to her feet, he fumbled in his pocket, drew forth a whistle, put it to his lips, blew.

No audible sound resulted. The note was too high, too shrill to be detected by human ears.

Mia MacIver quit squirming, gaped at him blankly.

Cosmo's eyes searched the dense pearl gray cloud ceiling. He blew twice more on the soundless whistle.

There was a disturbance in the cloud layer directly overhead as if tremen-

dous fans were boiling the impenetrable fleecy ceiling into a froth. Then a huge grotesque shape plummeted from the clouds. With back flailing wings, the monster settled to the ground.

Mia screamed, tried to squirm free.

"Let me go! Let me go!"

"It's just a bird," he assured her.

"Just a bird, hell!" Mia shuddered.

"That thing's a nightmare. What is it?"

"An Ormoo."

The Ormoo cocked its red-brown eye at Cosmo, rubbed its gunmetal gray beak against his leg, emitted a pleased raucous squawk.

Mia flinched. The beak looked capable of severing Cosmo's leg like a twig. From wing tip to wing tip the Ormoo extended over sixty feet. Its pearl gray plumage was a perfect camouflage as it drifted through Venus' eternal cloud blanket.

"Down!" shouted Cosmo.

The Ormoo crouched to its breast like a hen setting on her eggs. A saddle was strapped to its back.

"Cosmo!" cried Mia in terror, struggling to wrench free.

The Ormoo cocked its head again, eyed the frantic girl gravely as a robin might watch a beetle.

"My God, Cosmo, that thing wants to eat me. I'll—I'll have hysterics."

He laughed, flung her astride the saddle. Holding onto her naked ankle, he vaulted up behind.

"Up!" he shouted.

The Ormoo lurched to its feet. It took a few ungainly steps, launched itself into the air with a powerful drive of its legs. The massive wings lashed the air like flails as it spiraled upward.

Mia clung to Cosmo with terror.

"Take me back, Cosmo. I won't tell the Commissioner you're the Renegade. I'll lie like a Martian diplomat. Only make this monstrosity go down! Please Cosmo!"

He put an arm about her waist, steadying her.

"Don't be frightened. He won't hurt you so long as I'm here."

"The hell you say," said Mia between chattering teeth. "I tell you that bird considers me in the same light as a juicy worm."

Already, the tenuous mist was closing around them. The Ormoo still spiraled

upward. Cosmo saw a patrol flash by beneath them, pause like a humming bird over the patio. Another, then another streaked in from different directions.

Mia MacIver leaned over all at once, shrieked in a despairing voice: "Help! Help!"

"You little wretch," Cosmo grinned, clapped his hand over her mouth. She bit him.

He jerked his hand away. Before she could cry out again, the wool-like cloud blanket smothered them. Everything disappeared in moist white fleece. Mia slumped forlornly in Cosmo's powerful arm.

"Home," Cosmo shouted.

The giant bird wheeled off at an angle, wings beating with the rhythmic swish of waves lapping at a beach. Guided by some peculiar sixth sense, it headed by the shortest route for the Cloud Mountains.

For a while, the whish—swish of the Ormoo's wings was the only sound. It was like flying through a warm blinding blizzard.

"Does it know where it's going?" Mia twisted about in Cosmo's arm, curiosity overcoming her terror. Already her brown piquant features dripped with moisture. Her damp yellow tunic clung to her pliant figure like skin.

"Yes. The patrol planes can't navigate in these clouds. But the Ormoo can. It flies by instinct."

She relaxed, laid her damp black curls against his shoulder.

"Cosmo, why did you turn renegade?"

Her attitude had undergone such an about face that his green eyes hardened warily.

"It's a long story."

Mia snuggled deeper in his arms. "Was it because your father and mother were killed and Bemmelman stole your plantation?"

"That was part of it. My nurse fled with me to the Cloud Mountains. The Jovians trailed us, hunted us for months, then we fell in with a party of outlaws. They were rough men, but kind. I didn't understand much that was happening at the time, but later I managed to piece it together. I swore I'd make Bemmelman pay."

He laughed mirthlessly. "It was no use.

The authorities weren't interested in hearing anything against him. I thought maybe if I could get concrete evidence, that would force them to act. I broke into his manor house. I was discovered, but I got away. I was wearing a hood to conceal my features. The newscasters played it up. The hooded man. The Renegade. I suddenly found myself notorious—an outlaw."

"But you raided other plantations. You stirred up the serfs!" She couldn't keep the edge of hate and accusation out of her voice.

"Some," he admitted with a grin, "though we preyed on other outlaws principally. But whenever the Security Patrol couldn't solve a crime, they laid it to the Renegade. The list is astounding: murder, rapine, theft." He chuckled grimly. "I've even been credited with committing two killings at the same time over five hundred miles apart."

"But even if you get Bemmelman," Mia pointed out; "what can you gain. You're still an outlaw. You'll be sent to the disintegration chamber."

"Oh, they'll get me someday," he replied coolly. "But first, I'll drag down Bemmelman."

THE Ormoo flew steadily, strongly. Presently, the girl said:

"Does the Ormoo really understand your commands?"

"A few simple ones."

"Would it obey me?"

"Try it."

"Down," cried Mia.

The Ormoo plummeted toward the surface. Mia clapped her hands, shrieked: "Up!" Its wings thundered as it gained altitude again.

She twisted around in the saddle. "It obeys me," she laughed infectiously. She placed her hands, as if to steady herself on Cosmo's shoulder. All at once, her gray eyes contracted. She gave him a tremendous push.

Caught completely by surprise, Cosmo lunged desperately for the saddle, missed. He felt himself slipping faster and faster on the bird's wet back. There he went over with a rush.

His wildly grabbing hand slid down Mia's bare leg. Like a drowning man

clutching at a straw, his fingers closed about her ankle.

Mia gave a shriek of terror, rolled over on her stomach, hugged the saddle.

"Let go!" she yelled. "You're pulling me off!" She kicked wildly at the man dangling pendulum-like from her foot.

Cosmo grunted. He pulled himself up, grabbed her leg just above the calf. Thrusting his free hand into the Ormoo's feathers, he seized a large quill, inched himself upward.

Mia was too busy hanging to the saddle to kick at him. She lay stomach down across the Ormoo's back clinging with the strength of panic.

Cosmo released her leg, got a grip on her tunic. It parted halfway up her back, leaving him dangling wildly from the huge quill. He caught her leg again, strained upward until he could grasp the saddle and heave himself astride.

He sat there, trembling with exhaustion, panting.

Mia still lay stomach down across the saddle sobbing with frustration. There were red finger weals on ankle, calf and thigh where Cosmo's iron fingers had dug into her flesh.

He flashed her his sudden grin. "You little devil," he panted. "I ought to dangle you over the Ormoo's side. See how you'd like it."

A shudder passed through the girl. "I hate you! I hate you!" she sobbed in frustrated rage.

There was a soothing tempo to the swish-lift of the giant Ormoo's flight. Mia dozed as the miles fled past, slumped against Cosmo's chest.

Then unexpectedly, the bird wheeled, flapped sharply upward. Its huge wing tips brushed the face of a cliff. Fog swirled, whipped into froth by the frenzied wings.

Mia MacIver awakened in terror, clung to Cosmo, pressed her damp quivering body against him. The bird wheeled again and again, always gaining altitude.

"We're in the Mountains of the Clouds." Cosmo's green eyes glittered. "We'll be at the roost any moment."

It was colder. Mia shivered. Then the Ormoo began to settle. Wings thrashing, it came to rest with a jar.

Nothing was visible but cloud, thick,

clinging. The mountains, thrusting up into Venus' cloud sheath, were perpetually mantled with the gray vapor. The deep throated roar of a waterfall beat at their ears like thunder.

Cosmo slid off the Ormoo's back, shouted at Mia to jump. His voice was drowned in the waterfall. A dash of spray struck his face.

He felt for her ankle, yanked. She came tumbling into his arms with a scream. Cosmo laughed, bore her lightly across the jumble of sticks which was the Ormoo's nest, down a long slippery flight of steps descending into the chasm. Spray drenched them both. The roar was unbearable.

He paused, fumbled at a section of the cliff. A door swung inward, revealing a long low chamber hewn from the living rock.

Cosmo carried the wet and shivering girl across the threshold.

Fog swirled about them like steam from a turkish bath. He set her on her feet, shut the door. The roar of the waterfall was blotted out. Only the hissing of gas jets which lighted the chamber disturbed the silence.

"My private entrance." He surveyed his prize. The wet yellow tunic revealed every subtle curve. "You're a handsome wench, Mia."

Mia MacIver frowned. "Entrance to what?"

"The Renegade's abode. The mountain's honeycombed with caves. Come on."

But Mia hung back dubiously. "What are you going to do with me?"

He eyed the suspicious girl, said solemnly: "Oh, the usual thing."

"The usual thing?" She swallowed. "That's what I was afraid of!"

"**YOU'RE** easily resigned," he observed dryly, and urged her toward the door at the rear of the chamber. "You need to get out of that wet tunic." He grinned, regarded the rent in the back of the garment. "It isn't doing its duty any longer anyway."

"I think you're horrible!" She grabbed the tear together, sidled crabwise through the door, her cheeks hot.

Cosmo followed chuckling. A long narrow corridor burrowed ahead of them straight into the heart of the mountain.

Flaring gas jets hissed at regular intervals along the walls.

All at once the grin was wiped from his face. He seized Mia's arm, said: "Hold it!"

Mia bit her lip, gasped.

Three men had edged into the corridor from a bisecting passage. They were huge, almost seven feet tall with skin a vivid blue. They were quite naked and the muscles bulged beneath their blue hides.

"Jovian Dawn Men!" Mia whispered. "My God! They're running amok!"

Cosmo felt the cold breath of death blow up his spine. His hand slid automatically to his shoulder holster. It was empty. With a curse, he remembered that it had been taken by the Blue Venus. Her dart gun, he'd tossed aside, once free of the Bemmelman plantation.

The three naked giants minced daintily closer, nostrils flaring as they caught their scent. "They're not amok," he said over his shoulder. "The rutting season is months off yet. There's something else behind this."

Mia said with incredulity: "Look at their left shoulders. See that scar. The fern leaf! That's Hal Bemmelman's brand!" Cosmo, those are Bemmelman's slaves!"

The blue giants crouched. Their violet eyes were passionless, their handsome faces calm, inscrutable.

"Back!" Cosmo suddenly shouted in a tone of authority, and took a step toward them. A low snarl rumbled in their throats. Then like cats on a mouse, they pounced.

Mia screamed.

Cosmo kicked one of them in the belly, heard him grunt. With balled fist he swung at the placid handsome features of the second blue giant. Pain, like a hot iron, shot up his arm from his bruised knuckles. The Jovian shook his head, grabbed Cosmo's wrist, jerked. His arm felt as if it were being torn from the socket.

He kicked, slugged the emotionless face with his free hand. The grip never relaxed. He heard Mia scream again like a rabbit in a steel trap.

Then the Jovian clouted him brutally alongside the temple with his open fist. Cosmo's head snapped sideways like a

punching bag. His knees collapsed. He seemed to be falling into the chasm of the waterfall, down, down into stygian blackness.

IV

COSMO gradually became aware of a jolting swaying movement. At each jolt, a flash of pain shot across his eyes. He sat up, cracked his skull against something solid. A blinding pain jolted him into full consciousness.

He was in a cage, he saw, swung on poles like a litter between two of the blue giants. They were jogging along through a forest.

At once he became aware of warmth along his side, twisted his head. Mia was regarding him from wide frightened eyes. They'd been tumbled side by side into the cage. The girl was almost naked, her yellow tunic in tatters.

"You hurt?" he asked.

She shook her head.

He closed his eyes against the ache in his skull. If the pain would only let up. His mind felt fuzzy, his thoughts incoherent.

"Whew. That brute sure gave me a wallop. What happened?"

He could feel Mia shiver against him. "It was dreadful," she said. "They grabbed me—ugh!—and stuffed me in this cage. They had it hidden outside on the trail from the Ormoo's nest. Then they dumped you in on top of me like a bag of flour. I—I thought you were dead."

"So did I," said Cosmo dryly.

She regarded him dubiously, said: "They picked up the cage then and began to run down the trail. They carried us over the most impossible places, always down. I died with fright. Just a little while ago we came out into the forest."

"I know the trail," he said. "Nothing but Jovian primitives could have managed it. I wonder why Bemmelman didn't have me killed outright."

"Bemmelman?" Mia looked puzzled.

"Sure. They're his slaves. You saw the fern leaf brand on their shoulders. We walked straight into a trap."

"But that's impossible. How could they have found your hideout?"

Cosmo shook his head and immediately

regretted it. "One of my men must be a spy. Bemmelman's shrewder than I've given him credit for being."

"A spy?" Mia's eyes grew round as saucers. "But why?"

"I don't know. Unless he's after that fifty thousand monad reward on my head!" He frowned. "Bemmelman said something odd last night when he caught me in his house. He said he'd been trying to get in touch with me."

The blue giants swung effortlessly through the incredible forest. The trees were like cathedral columns disappearing in the swirling cloud blanket.

"You said we'd walked into a trap," insisted Mia. "How could Bemmelman know when you'd get back. I don't understand."

Cosmo snorted. "Anybody could guess I'd head for my hideout after the alarm at your place. Most likely, Bemmelman tipped that Judas of his by radio when to expect me. The Dawn Men are animals. They hunt by scent. That fellow must have given them a piece of my clothing, planted them in the corridor. It was as simple as that."

"But what does Bemmelman want with me?" she wailed.

"Don't forget the Blue Venus. I told you he'd been trying to duplicate that experiment."

"I don't believe it," said Mia in a shocked voice. "He wouldn't dare! Would he?"

"What's to hinder him? At Venusport they'll think the Renegade abducted you. Who'd suspect that the eminent Councillor Bemmelman had hijacked me?"

"I don't believe it," she repeated indignantly. "You're just trying to throw mud on him because you think he murdered your parents and stole your plantation. It's—it's an obsession. You have no proof."

Cosmo regarded her with cloudy green eyes. "I had the Interstellar Investigation Bureau dig out his past. I've a man in Bemmelman's household right now. I know." He looked through the bars of the cage. They were approaching the edge of the forest. He turned back, said: "Something besides slave breeding is going on at Bemmelman's. There are parts of the plantation where my man never has been able to penetrate."

"What do you think it is?" Mia's voice was a whisper.

"I don't know. But hasn't it occurred to you that slave breeding must entail a slow turnover. A child isn't marketable until it's sixteen or seventeen at least."

"What are you driving at?"

"Suppose Bemmelman has discovered some way to speed up growth—to hasten maturity."

"An aging process? It's—it's impossible."

He shook his head. "Plants are forced; why not animals?"

The blue giants, he saw, had broken through the last of the trees into a lush meadow of mauve fen grass.

"Look, Mia!" he pointed toward the center of the meadow. "The second lap of our journey is provided for. Our kidnapper shows considerable foresight."

In the center of the meadow, a small surface plane rested on the fen grass like a silver bullet. There was no sign of life inside or out. *

"IT'S deserted," said Mia in surprise. Cosmo frowned, but didn't reply.

The Jovian Dawn Men trotted straight to the empty plane. They opened a door in the side, shoved them within, cage and all. Cosmo heard the door click shut. The Dawn Men had not followed them inside.

He glanced curiously about the interior. All the seats had been removed, even the pilot's chair.

"Where's the pilot?" asked Mia in a subdued voice.

He shook his head. Through the port, he could see the blue giants disappearing among the trees.

Just then the plane gave a jerk.

"It's moving!" With a shriek, Mia flung herself onto Cosmo.

He felt the plane lurch again, then shoot upward. At a hundred feet it leveled itself off, darted away on what he judged to be a southerly course. There was still no evidence of a pilot.

Mia MacIver held onto Cosmo like a drowning man to a straw as the pilotless plane hurtled southward.

He drew a long breath. "Robot pilot." He patted her shoulder. "There's nothing supernatural about it."

Mia pulled herself away. "I didn't mean

to throw myself on you like that. I . . . I . . ."

"Don't apologize." Cosmo flashed her his quick wolfish grin. "I enjoyed it. You've been hurling yourself at me at fairly regular intervals all day."

"I think you're horrid." Mia's cheeks colored, but her gray eyes twinkled.

"Mia," he said serious all at once, "if Bemmelman—er—disposes of me, you'll have to contact my man yourself. I told you I had a spy planted in his household. His name is Penang-ih tok."

She looked suddenly startled.

"He's a Venusian, an outcast Fozoql. You can recognize him by the blue star tattooed on his forehead. Tell him that my orders are to have the men raid Bemmelman's plantation and carry you to Venusport."

"Penang-ih tok," she repeated.

"Of course," he added dryly; "I'm hopeful Bemmelman won't kill me right off, and I can contact Penang-ih tok myself. In which case, you won't need to bother your pretty head about it."

He yawned, stretched out as comfortably as he could arrange himself in their confined quarters, closed his eyes.

"You're not going to sleep," exploded Mia in alarm.

"Certainly. Nothing else to do." He patted his shoulder. "Make yourself comfortable."

She eyed him with suspicion.

"Go ahead. I haven't any designs on you," he said dryly.

"Well you don't need to be so assertive about it," said Mia, and laid her head gingerly on his shoulder.

"Sure," said Cosmo. He was staring at the roof of the cage.

Presently, she said in a sleepy voice, "I haven't leprosy either, in case you're worried."

"Of course not."

Mia muttered something unladylike under her breath.

"What's that?"

"I think," said Mia distinctly, "that you're a worm!"

Cosmo chuckled. The plane continued to steer itself arrow-like into the South of Mu.

A faint jerk brought Cosmo wide awake as some jungle animal. The plane, he

realized had stopped, settled to Venus. It was night. The green phosphorescent light of the luminous vegetation flooded through the port holes. From somewhere, the sound of a muffled bell, ringing, ringing, reached his ears.

Through the port, he could see a corner of a tower, part of a slate roof. The grotesque arms of a telo-antenna sprouted from the peak of the tower. He heard a door squeal open. The bell sounded louder, then it stopped to be replaced by the mutter of voices approaching.

"Wake up." He shook Mia MacIver gently.

She opened her eyes, stared at him in bewilderment. "Where are we?"

"Shhh!"

The door opened. Cosmo caught sight of Bemmelman's gross features in the opening. He looked ghastly in the phosphorescent glow. Beyond him reared an immense gray pile of a building.

The planter's jaw dropped in disbelief as he recognized his captives. Then a tide of red swept up from his bull-like neck.

"You!" he shouted. "What the hell are you doing in there?"

"Didn't you know?" said Cosmo dryly. "I'm trying to cure myself of claustrophobia."

But already, a shrewd gleam of triumph had replaced the disappointment in Bemmelman's pig-like brown eyes.

"You're the Renegade." He rubbed his hands together, began to grin. "Yes sir, you're the Renegade. I should have guessed it before. And you, Mia." He threw back his head, roared until the court reverberated with his heavy laughter.

"Let us in on the joke," said Cosmo.

Bemmelman stopped laughing, wiped his eyes. "Two birds with one stone. I didn't expect to catch both of you in the same trap. No sir, that I didn't." He stepped back, clapped his hands.

TWO naked Blue Dawn Men appeared, hauled forth the cage, shouldered it. With Bemmelman following, they bore it across the court, into a doorway at the base of the lichen covered tower.

"I feel perfectly ridiculous," whispered Mia, bouncing around in the cage. "Thank goodness none of my friends can see me."

Cosmo chuckled, shot a glance after

Bemmelman who was crossing the floor to an intercommunicating telecast. The room appeared to be a guard room. Weapons were racked against the walls, and a dozen naked blue giants lay sleeping on the floor. These raised their handsome, classical heads, surveyed the captives from incurious violet eyes. Cosmo put his lips against Mia's ear said:

"Remember Penang-ih tok."

He heard Bemmelman say: "Switch on the current in the tower. Send Llana to me at once."

A voice from the audio replied: "Right."

From the corner of his eye, Cosmo saw a sheet of flame sear across the door leading to the court beyond. Then it vanished.

"Force screen," he guessed.

Bemmelman approached, grinning amiably. He was wearing a snuff brown suit which set on him like a sack.

"Don't try to escape," cautioned the planter as he inserted a slender key in the spring lock, threw back the top of the cage. "You'd be electrocuted if you went through any of the outside doors or windows."

Cosmo and Mia stood up shakily.

"We won't bolt, if that's what you mean," Cosmo replied dryly. He glanced at the handsome, impassive blue giants, discarded any idea of attacking Bemmelman directly.

"I'm happy to see you're amenable to reason, Cosmo. I sure am." He rubbed his nose. "Yes sir. I like a reasonable man. I'm going to be able to use you, Cosmo."

"That's what you said last night," Cosmo reminded him, his face blank. The palms of his hands were sweating. He wanted to run as fast and far from the sly, red faced man as he could. Bemmelman, he was beginning to sense, was as slippery and dangerous as the infamous Venusian swamp rath.

A door at the rear of the chamber opened suddenly. Cosmo jumped. A glance assured him it was only a slave girl. She wasn't a Venusian, though. He frowned. She was from Earth.

The Terran girl regarded the prisoners curiously, then faced Bemmelman. "Rabaul said you wanted me." She was dressed in a green sarong which reached from her knees to her breasts. On her left

shoulder was a small scar in the shape of a fern leaf: Bemmelman's brand.

"Yes sir," said the planter; "so I do. So I do, Llana. Be so good as to escort Miss MacIver to the tower apartment. Don't leave her."

Mia shuddered, clung tighter to Cosmo.

"Keep your head, Mia." He gently disengaged her hand. "If you don't go, they'll drag you off willy-nilly."

Dispiritedly she followed the slave girl from the guardroom. She was so woe-begone that Cosmo felt a wrench at his heart. He faced the planter, said in a hard voice, "What did you want with me?"

Bemmelman's eyelids drooped. He turned on his heel, said shortly, "Come along, Cosmo," and started for the door. "I want to have a talk with you. Yes sir, a very interesting talk."

V

FLANKED by the two blue giants Cosmo followed his host down a long corridor, up a flight of steps and into a sumptuously furnished apartment. A yellow grass mat carpeted the floor from wall to wall. The furniture was covered with a coarse, woven fabric, barbaric in its color.

With a sigh, Bemmelman lowered himself into a lounge chair, indicated another for Cosmo.

"You're tired. You've had an uncomfortable journey. I won't keep you up long." He rang a bell.

With amazing promptness, a wizened Mercurian scurried through a sliding wall panel.

"Krudo juice," said Bemmelman; "cold. And sandwiches. Better bring a bottle of food concentrates, too."

The Mercurian disappeared.

Cosmo was staring at the bank of open windows. They gave onto a Venusian garden of grotesque beauty, each plant and shrub sparkling with a cold phosphorescence. Several insects, the huge, bird-like insects of Venus, winged in from the garden. As they reached the window, there was a sudden sparkle of flame. The insects dropped dead to the floor.

"An excellent warning," Bemmelman said in a silky voice. "The force screens, you know. Yes sir, not only do they dis-

courage guests from straying; but they keep intruders outside."

Cosmo repressed a shiver. "Ingenious gadget."

"Gadget?" The red faced planter threw back his head, laughed uproariously. "You're a droll rogue, you are. I like a man with a sense of humor." He rubbed his nose, then pointed to a picture above the sofa. "Recognize her, don't you?"

Cosmo saw a three dimensional photograph of a nude. Her skin was pale blue, flushed with healthy rose, her hair like molten gold.

"Sofi," Cosmo said with distaste. "The Blue Venus. I should think, Bemmelman, you'd have to wait rather long for your profits."

"So I do. So I do. But its possible to harvest a yearly crop from a forest. Trees grow even slower than people. I'll show you the slave pens tomorrow. I've only the one Blue Venus, though. Unfortunately the rest have been males."

Cosmo wondered why the planter had called attention to the Blue Venus. He suspected that Bemmelman was subtly trying to find out if he had learned anything from Sofi.

"What do you do with the males?" he asked, prompted by something in Bemmelman's voice.

"They're interesting, but they've no market value. I have them destroyed."

Cosmo bit his lip. Bemmelman was a monster. He wondered what the sealed chambers held, the chambers where his spy Penang-ih tok had never been able to penetrate.

"I suppose," said the planter unexpectedly; "you're curious about what I wanted with you?"

Cosmo nodded.

"Well sir, I could have had you killed back in the caves of the Cloud Mountains. I've had a spy among your men for some time." He paused as the Mercurian returned, deposited a tray between them. It held a silver pitcher of krudo juice, thin sandwiches, a bottle of food concentrates.

"Go ahead," said Cosmo when the Mercurian had departed. He popped two of the pills into his mouth.

"Where was I? Oh yes. I could have had you assassinated several times, but you've some information I want?"

Cosmo's green eyes narrowed warily. "What information?"

The planter leaned forward, tapped him on the knee. "That bird. The Giant Ormoo. Oh yes, I know how you escaped from the roof last night. Yes sir, and very neat, too." He beamed amiably. "I want to know where the Ormoos feed."

Cosmo sat back in surprise.

"Why?"

"That's my secret," said the beefy planter. "Yes sir, that's my secret. But I'm a business man, Cosmo. Show me where the Ormoo feeds, and I'll make it worth your while."

"Five thousand monad," Cosmo hazarded.

Bemmelman didn't blink an eye. "Five thousand monad," he agreed.

COSMO sat back, his face blank. The planter, he realized, had no more idea of paying him five thousand monad than he had of adopting him. He'd agreed to the preposterous sum too readily. Cosmo's green eyes hardened.

"And suppose I refuse."

"But you won't. You can't. No sir. If you refused, I'll be forced to kill you and trace the bird myself."

"The devil you will." Cosmo could feel sweat starting from his forehead. "That bird's savage as a tiger. You've already tried to trace it to its feeding ground, haven't you? That's why you planted a spy among my men, wasn't it?"

"Yes sir," Bemmelman admitted with a sigh. "I don't mind telling you he was supposed to find out what and where the bird ate. But it damn near tore him to pieces."

Cosmo didn't say anything.

Bemmelman leaned forward, tapped his knee again. "Unfortunately, the birds are rare as the dodo. I've spent quite a bit of money trying to locate another. The only one that's been caught is in the Solar Apiary on Earth."

Mention of the Ormoo in the Solar Apiary stirred Cosmo's memory. He stared at Bemmelman with narrowed eyes. The Ormoo in its wild state matured to its full size in a few months. The one which the Terran expedition had secured, hadn't reached adulthood until its nineteenth year. The discrepancy had been

puzzling ornithologists ever since. Theories had flooded the scientific journals, but to date, no one had explained satisfactorily why a wild Ormoo should mature over twenty times as fast as the same bird in captivity.

"Well?" Bemmelman rubbed his nose, his eyelids drooping.

"If I show you where the Ormoo feeds, what guarantee have I that you'll carry out your side of the bargain?"

"Just my word," said Bemmelman with a chuckle. "Just my word."

Two rouge-like spots sprang out on Cosmo's cheek bones. He came halfway erect in his chair.

"No violence, please." The planter held up his hand. "Look behind you."

Cosmo turned his head. The two Jovian primitives were crouched to spring. He sank back in his chair, managed a tight grin. His lips felt dry, his stomach hollow.

"I don't think you appreciate your position, Cosmo," said the planter silkily. "No sir, I don't." He heaved himself from his chair with a grunt. "I've something to show you. Come with me."

The two Jovian Dawn Men fell in beside Cosmo again as he trailed the planter down three steps, along a short corridor to a sunken court. Bemmelman paused, pointed to a huge wooden cross in the center of the court.

"You weren't depending on him, were you," he smirked.

Cosmo felt his blood run cold. His fists clenched until the nails bit into the flesh.

The body of Penang-ihtok hung from the cross. The outcast Fozoql had been crucified upside down.

"You see," said Bemmelman, his voice heavy with assurance; "how futile it is to oppose me."

Cosmo turned away from the cross with its grisly burden. He looked coldly, speculatively at Bemmelman's beefy smiling face. At the look, fright glimmered in the planter's eyes. He made a quick gesture to the Jovians who seized Cosmo by either arm.

"Take him away," he ordered. "We'll talk it over tomorrow."

Cosmo was conducted into a plainly, but comfortably furnished room. One of the blue giants immediately stretched himself

on the sofa and went to sleep. The other, though, took a stance by the door, folded his arms, regarded Cosmo with the unwinking stare of an idol. Obviously, the Jovian primitives intended to spell each other.

With a grunt of annoyance, Cosmo retreated into the bathroom. He had grossly underestimated Bemmelman, he realized with chagrin. A malignant genius, the slave breeder had no more scruples than his Dawn Men.

Cosmo heard a soft step behind him, whirled around. His Jovian guard was standing placidly just within the door.

"Damn," he snapped, nerves jangling. "I'm not going to crawl out the drain."

The blue giant never changed expression by so much as a flicker.

Cosmo got a grip on himself, shot the giant his flashing grin. "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?"

He stripped off coat and trousers, hung them carefully over the Jovian's shoulder, stepped under the shower.

Considerably refreshed, he returned to his sleeping chamber, crawled raw into the huge bed. But sleep escaped him. That stark cross, the body illuminated by the radiations of the lichens and mosses, persisted in thrusting itself before his eyes. He clenched his fists, trembled in an agony of impotent fury. Somehow, he'd trip up Bemmelman, smash his disgusting racket.

COSMO awakened in the huge bed, sweating with terror. The echo of some nameless horror still rang in his ears. He saw the Dawn Man, motionless as a statue, watching him with animal patience. Then he heard it again.

It was a girl's scream. It reached him faintly. It went on and on. He leaped out of bed, tugged on his trousers.

The Dawn Man sprang across the room to intercept him. Cosmo seized a metal chair, swung it with the same movement. It caught the blue giant on his head and shoulders. The blow would have felled an ox. The Jovian folded onto the carpet, lay still. Cosmo thought he must be dead.

The second Jovian primitive jumped from the sofa at the crash. He had awakened like an animal. With a low snarl, he leaped for Cosmo.

Cosmo ducked under his first rush, crashed the chair down on the back of his

head. The giant staggered groggily, but didn't go down.

Cosmo measured the distance, walloped him again. The second blue giant went over like a falling tree.

Without stopping for coat or shoes, Cosmo hurtled into the hall. The screaming had been silenced. The building was quiet as a deserted church.

He set out at a lope in the direction of the tower where Mia was confined. That had been Mia screaming, he was sure. He'd recognized the timbre of her voice.

His heart thudding, he reached a stair, took the steps two at a time. It bent sharply to the left, went up another flight. He must be in the tower itself. The silence was oppressive. He wished fervently he had a dart gun, a ray projector, anything that would serve as a weapon. The steps continued to wind upward.

Gasping for breath, he reached the fifth level. From beneath a door seeped a crack of light. He sniffed. A peculiar odor impinged on his nostrils. Then he heard Bemmelman's rough voice like the rasp of iron.

"That's done. Take her to the slave pens."

Cosmo's heart contracted. A blinding rage swept him. He'd been too late.

He rammed the door with his shoulder. It burst open as if exploded. For a second he was poised in the doorway, big, rangy, naked to the waist, his hands hooked like claws, his nostrils distended.

Without a word, he leaped on Bemmelman.

The planter was standing beside an operating table upon which Mia MacIver was strapped. He fell back a step, raised his arm in a gesture of defense.

Cosmo's rush bowled him over backward. He tried to scramble to his feet, but Cosmo was on him like a cat on a mouse. Time after time, he drove his fist into the planter's face. A blinding rage shook him to the marrow.

As if from a distance, he heard Mia scream again.

"Cosmo! Look out behind you!" He swung off the insensible Bemmelman, twisted to his feet. He saw Llana, the Terran slave girl, directly behind him. Her arm was upraised, her fist clutching a needle like dagger. With a sob, she

plunged it downward toward his heaving chest.

Cosmo caught her wrist in a grip of iron, tore the dagger from her fingers. Contemptuously, he tossed the girl into a corner of the room, turned to Mia.

"Mia, are you all right?"

She gave a sob of relief. "Yes, yes! But get me out of this iron lung before I pass out."

He fumbled hastily at the clamps. Her hair was tumbled. One shoulder of her tattered yellow tunic had been torn down to her stomach. He paused suddenly, his eyes dilating.

There was an angry red scar above Mia's left breast. He realized what the smell on the landing outside the tower room had been. It was the odor of burning flesh.

Mia MacIver had been branded!

VI

COSMO said, "Mia, Mia," and gathered her to him. "What have they done to you?"

Llana scurried past like a frightened rabbit.

"She's getting away!" Mia cried. "She'll rouse the house!"

"Never mind." Cosmo could hear her clatter down the stair. "We've got a hostage." He gave Mia a wry grin, added, "that is, if I haven't killed Bemmelman."

Mia shivered, leaned against him. He glanced down, saw she was regarding him strangely. With a dry sob she buried her head on his shoulder.

"Cosmo, Cosmo, don't ever leave me again." Her voice was almost lost. "Take me with you—into the mountains."

He frowned, said: "You crazy kid. You don't know what you're saying. I'm an outlaw. There's no way to prove Bemmelman murdered my father and mother. And even if there was, that wouldn't clear me. Every crime the Security Patrol hasn't been able to solve has been laid at my doorstep."

"We could run away. We could go to Ganymede."

He shook his head. "It wouldn't make any difference. As long as the Renegade is alive they'll hunt. They'd trail me, extradite me."

"I don't care. I don't care. At least—"

The brazen clamor of the alarm bells shrilled suddenly in their ears.

Cosmo tore himself away, knelt beside the unconscious planter. He drew a dart gun from Bemmelman's pocket, said: "He's alive."

"What are we going to do, Cosmo?"

With a grunt, he hoisted the slack body over his shoulder. The alarm bells were pealing louder.

"I saw a telo-antenna on the roof of the tower when we were in the court. I've a hunch the telo-projector is somewhere above us."

Mia MacIver, clutching the tunic about her shoulder, asked: "But can't we run for it?"

"Not while the force screen is operating."

Bent under his heavy burden, Cosmo strode from the room, up the steps to the next level. Saying, "What's this?" he pressed the button of a sliding panel. The door slid back in its oiled grooves. "Whew!" he said. "My lady's chamber."

Mia MacIver peered around him wide eyed.

It was a large room, octagon shaped and carpeted wall to wall with the shaggy gray fur of the Polar Aard. But the most startling feature was the mirrors. The walls were paneled solid in mirrors. It gave the impression that the room stretched on forever.

"Well!" said Mia; "if this is the telecast operator's room, he's a voluptuous creature!"

Cosmo snorted, stepped across the threshold. At once replicas of themselves flashed in all the mirrored chambers.

"I feel wicked just being in a room like this," said Mia.

Cosmo heard a click behind him, whirled around. The door through which they'd just passed was shut. In every direction, they were faced by an endless vista of mirrored chambers.

Mia gasped. "I'm scared," she said.

"Who isn't?" said Cosmo shortly and dropped Bemmelman to the floor with a thud. "What are you staring at?" He whipped around again.

A second door in the mirrors stood ajar. Framed in the entrance was a magnificently beautiful girl in skimpy shorts

and bra. She was the twin of the photograph below stairs.

"Well, if it isn't my old friend, Sofi," said Cosmo without enthusiasm.

There was no recognition in the Blue Venus' violet eyes. Her flawless pale-blue features revealed neither shock nor surprise.

"That's Bemmelman." She indicated the planter. "Is he dead?"

"No. Only unconscious."

"Oh. That's too bad," she said in a calm manner, and swept up to the prostrate slave breeder, planted a kick in the seat of his pants. "There! I've never had the nerve to do that when he was conscious."

Mia gasped.

Cosmo said sharply: "Where's the telecast room?"

"The next floor. But you can't escape. Nobody ever escapes from this house."

BEMMELMAN stirred, opened his eyes, sat up groggily. His face was puffy, swollen. Blood had dried on his chin. He didn't say anything.

The clatter of many feet resounded on the stair outside the boudoir. Mia clutched Cosmo's arm, said: "They're coming!"

Cosmo took the dart gun from his pocket, narrowed his green eyes. "You go first, Bemmelman, if they rush us. Understand?"

The slave breeder glared at Cosmo, moistened his battered lips. "What do you want me to do?" He spoke with difficulty.

"Clear the tower. Order everyone into the rest of the house."

Bemmelman nodded sullenly.

Cosmo saw one of the mirrors shiver violently. Then the panel slid back. The stair was jammed with naked blue Jovians and Venusian serfs. The slave girl, Llana, was in the forefront. She pointed at Cosmo, screamed: "There they are!"

The Jovians started to surge through the narrow door.

Cosmo drew a bead on Bemmelman's thick neck, smiled grimly.

Blood drained out of the planter's face. "Get out!" he cried in panic.

The rescuers halted, stared stupidly. The ones in the rear continued to push forward causing momentary confusion.

"Get out!" Bemmelman raged. "Get out, you fools! D'you want to get me killed? Clear the tower!"

They began to withdraw sullenly.

Cosmo stepped after them, slid shut the panel. He could hear their footsteps retreating down the stair. He let his breath escape through his teeth.

"Keep your eye on the Blue Venus, Mia. She's a shifty wench."

Mia siezed a candlestick from a dainty Martian table, said, "This isn't going to hurt me half as bad as it will you," to Sofi.

Cosmo dug the dart gun into Bemmelman's kidneys. "Let's go up to the telecast room." He pushed the planter ahead of him through the door.

The stair well was deserted, silent.

"I smell roses," said Mia.

Cosmo thought he detected a glint of triumph in the slave breeder's eyes. "Up the steps, he said grimly. "At the first sign of treachery, Bemmelman, I'm pulling the trigger."

They reached the telecast room without opposition. It was a small square chamber banked with control panels. An opaque screen was built into the left wall. There was only one chair.

Cosmo closed the door, motioned Mia and the Blue Venus to one side. "Now, Bemmelman, call your head overseer; have him shut down the force screens."

The red-faced planter laughed shortly, said: "No sir." He had regained his composure. "No sir, you won't kill me. You'd be throwing away your only chance to stay alive. The force screen stays up."

"That's what I thought you'd say."

Cosmo slipped the dart gun in his pocket. His eyes became hard green stones. "What about the Ormoo's feeding ground? Why do you want to know where they eat?"

"That's my secret." A sullen note crept into Bemmelman's manner.

"You don't want me to mess you up, do you, Bemmelman?" Cosmo asked softly.

The planter flinched, but didn't answer.

Cosmo knocked him sprawling against the wall. He heard Mia gasp. He said evenly: "What about the Ormoo?"

Bemmelman tasted the blood in his mouth, said: "You'll never leave here alive, Cosmo. You won't be able to carry

tales. . . . Now wait a moment! There's a plant the birds eat that contains a drug. . . ." He paused.

Cosmo's eyes narrowed. He had the impression that the planter was listening, waiting for something to happen. He said, "Go ahead."

"The drug accelerates maturity. It acts directly through the glands."

"How did you hit on the discovery?" A feeling of revulsion made Cosmo's hands tremble, but his features were inscrutable.

Bemmelman chuckled amiably. "This information won't do you a bit of good," he said. "No sir, not a bit."

"Go ahead."

Bemmelman shrugged. "Well sir, I've been curious about how much longer it takes for an Ormoo in captivity to mature than the wild bird. The wild Ormoo, you know, reaches its full growth in less than a year. That's an amazing phenomenon when you consider its size. Yes sir. . . ." He paused again, mouth open, then hastily went on: "Yes sir. I wondered if it wasn't the wild birds' diet. I sent a man into the Cloud Mountains to locate an Ormoo. He found your bird's nest."

Cosmo's green eyes were opaque. Revulsion for the slave breeder welled in his throat.

BEMMELMAN'S manner was derisive. He rubbed his nose, said: "One day my man found a shrub in the nest. He sent it to me on the chance that it might be what I was looking for. It was. The leaves contain a drug, which, when injected into the bloodstream, accelerates maturity at an unbelievable rate." His lids drew down. "I injected it into one of the slave children in minute doses every twenty days. The child reached adolescence in eighteen months. In two years' time, she was full grown."

"You can breed slaves like guinea pigs now, eh Bemmelman?" Cosmo's voice was low. "And in two years' time have them ready for the market."

Bemmelman said, "Certainly," and paused.

"What are you listening for?" Cosmo asked suddenly.

"Nothing. Nothing at all." His little eyes darted about the room. "Unfortunately," he went on hurriedly, "I used

up all the drug on the experiment, and I haven't been able to locate any more of the plants. No sir, we've scoured the Cloud Mountains. They're difficult to explore. Infra red rays help some, but not much."

"Who's the spy you planted among my men?" Cosmo interrupted in a cold voice.

Bemmelman shut his mouth with a snap.

"Who is he? Tell me, Bemmelman, or by heavens, I'll work you over until your own mother couldn't recognize you."

Still the planter didn't reply.

Cosmo hit him in the mouth. The planter's head struck the wall. He slid down to the floor, said groggily: "It doesn't matter. No sir. I won't need him any more. He's a Martian. His name's Natal."

Cosmo wasn't surprised. They'd found the Martian wandering apparently lost in the mountains. A sly fellow, always curious, always prying.

Cosmo turned to the telecast. He felt Mia's horrified eyes on him; the child-like stare of the Blue Venus. He switched on the telecast, signaled his headquarters in the Cloud Mountains. At the third attempt, he got through.

To his surprise, the inscrutable mien of the Mercurian runaway flashed on the visoscreen. His amber eyes twinkled, a smile split his Buddha-like face, and he bowed three times until Cosmo could only see the top of his head.

"I see you got through all right," said Cosmo dryly. A faint hiss seemed to be coming through the audio. He tried to tune it out, but the hiss persisted.

"Yes," said the Mercurian. "Delightful fellows. But blood-thirsty. You should hear the tales they've been telling." He shuddered.

"I've heard them," Cosmo interrupted. "Often. Where's Big Unse?"

"Playing truk with the men. I'm on duty at the telecast."

Cosmo frowned. The hissing noise was louder. He said: "I haven't time for you to call him. I'm at the Bemmelman plantation. I'm holding Bemmelman himself as a hostage. Tell Big Unse to bring the Ormoo. You follow in the surface plane with the men. Don't land. Hang in the clouds above the plantation until I whistle for the Ormoo. Oh yes. Be sure that

Natal, the Martian, comes along. Got it?"

"Yes."

Cosmo flipped off the telecast, frowned. The hissing had not stopped. There was the faintest smell of roses in the air. He felt suddenly dizzy. Mia gave a small cry and crumpled to the floor.

"Paralysis gas!" he thought and wheeled toward Bemmelman, almost lost his balance as he did so.

The planter's head had dropped on his chest. He raised it groggily, leered with triumph at Cosmo. "Concealed tubes," he muttered. "Every room."

Cosmo swayed. He fumbled at his pocket. His hand emerged with the dart gun. He strained to elevate the gun, send a poisoned needle into the slave breeder. His muscles refused to obey him. The gun sagged. His knees sagged. Then slowly, he toppled sideways.

VII

COSMO opened his eyes in the office with the glassite desk. He sat up. Chains rattled. He realized with chagrin that he was manacled hand and foot.

Bemmelman was on the sofa. A serf, directed by the slave girl, Llana, was working over him. Mia and the Blue Venus were stretched out on the floor beside him, still unconscious. Both of them were manacled. Two Blue giants watched incuriously.

In a moment, Bemmelman stirred. He sat up, swung his feet to the floor. His eyes lit on Cosmo. With a grunt he crossed the room, kicked the manacled man in the ribs.

Cosmo's face hardened, but he didn't say anything.

The planter swung on his servitors, barked: "Get out!" They left the room, all except Llana. He turned back to Cosmo, said: "I'm through playing around with you. Yes sir. Where's the Ormoo's feeding ground?"

Cosmo said nothing.

Bemmelman's face went purple. He kicked Cosmo viciously in the ribs. "Where's the feeding ground? Where is it? Where is it?"

Mia regained consciousness, sat up. She stared wide-eyed at the berserk planter.

Bemmelman glanced at her, paused. He rubbed his nose, a fiendish light shining in his pig-like eyes. He said in a sudden altered tone: "I'm still willing to bargain, Cosmo."

"What do you mean?"

"Either you reveal the location of the feeding grounds, or I hand Miss MacIver over to the Dawn Men. Yes sir, I'm anxious to repeat that experiment." He pointed to the Blue Venus who was just coming out from under the effects of the gas.

Cosmo's features were inscrutable. He asked: "What happens to Miss MacIver if I give you that information?"

"I'll release her in Venusport with her fare back to Earth. I'm holding personal notes on the MacIver plantation anyway."

"Notes?" echoed Mia blankly. "Father never mentioned any notes. I—I don't believe it!"

A veil dropped before Bemmelman's eyes. "I haven't told you before. I didn't like to so soon after your father's death. But I lent him considerable money. Yes sir, considerable."

Cosmo laughed without humor. "Up to your old tricks, eh Bemmelman?"

"What d'you mean?" The red-faced planter looked faintly rattled. He took a threatening step.

"You kick me again," said Cosmo, "and I'll kill you if I have to bite you to death."

Mia giggled nervously.

"Well?" said Bemmelman. "That's my proposition. Take it or leave it."

"What about me?" asked Cosmo.

"You're worth fifty thousand monad on the hoof, Cosmo. Yes sir. I'm going to turn you and your men over to the Security Patrol."

"Suppose I talk?"

"Talk?" Bemmelman threw back his head and roared. "Talk d'you say? Who'll believe anything the Renegade says?"

"A nice point," Cosmo conceded dryly. "But what about Mia?"

"Miss MacIver? What can she tell? Aren't you forgetting, Cosmo, that I rescued her from you. Yes sir. What's more, I've captured you, and I'm turning you over to the officials." His eyes twinkled. "Who's she going to tell, anyway?"

Cosmo's lean visage was unreadable. So that, he thought, was the line Bemmelman planned to take. Only Mia Mac-Iver would never be released. He wondered if the planter really considered him such a fool. He said: "You don't give me much choice," and twisted to his feet. He hobbled to the desk, dropped awkwardly into the chair. "Give me pen and paper."

Bemmelman produced writing material, spread them before him.

"Here's the Cloud Mountains." Hindered by the manacles, Cosmo sketched a chain of hills, indicated north with a crude compass. He placed a dot halfway into the mountains, then laid off a line from the dot running diagonally into the most rugged sector. He shoved the paper across to Bemmelman. "The first dot's the Ormoo's nest. You know where it is?"

Bemmelman nodded, wrote "Ormoo's nest" on the map.

Cosmo closed his eyes, sighed faintly. "The mountains are impassable except by plane, and then its all blind flying. Rise to an altitude of four thousand meters. You'll clear any peaks that way. Starting at the Ormoo's nest, fly due North, Northwest for a distance of ninety-three kilometers." He paused.

ONLY the scrape of Bemmelman's pen could be heard as the planter wrote the directions on the bottom of the map.

"Drop straight into the valley," Cosmo went on as the pen scratching ceased. "It's narrow, a canyon. The floor of the valley is at an altitude of one thousand, seven hundred meters, so you'll be in clouds all the time. It's tricky navigating."

Bemmelman stopped writing, waved the paper dry. Then he folded it, put it away in the wall safe, behind the sliding panel. "This had better be right," he said ominously.

Cosmo, opening his eyes, said: "It's right. I've been there a dozen times. The first time the bird carried me there accidentally before he was well trained."

"Good." Bemmelman glanced at his watch. "Now Cosmo, we'll lay a trap for those men of yours. Yes sir. They should be along any minute. How many have you?"

"Nine." Again Cosmo emitted a faint

sigh. "What do you want me to do?" He realized that Mia and Llana both were staring at him with distaste. Only the Blue Venus seemed untouched.

"You can't betray your men!" Mia burst out.

Cosmo's face hardened. He said, "Can you suggest a better way?"

"You're a sensible man, Cosmo, a sensible man." The planter rubbed his hands together triumphantly. He snapped on the intercommunicating telecast on the glassite desk, said into it: "Rabaul!"

"Right," came the voice from the audio.

"That was good work with the gas tubes, Rabaul."

"You can thank Llana," came the voice of the overseer from the audio. Cosmo recognized the sibilant accent of a Martian. "She gave the alarm."

Bemmelman grunted. "Take twenty Jovians," he said, "and a dozen serfs. Arm the serfs with Ray Rifles. Hide them about the roof. The Renegade's men will try to land shortly and I'd like to prepare welcome for 'em."

"Right," came Rabaul's voice.

The planter switched off the telecast. He looked at Cosmo, smiled, said: "Whistle 'em down, Cosmo, that's all. My Jovians will take care of the rest."

"It's daylight," said the Blue Venus with an air of childish surprise. She was looking out the windows.

Cosmo was aware of the heat, all at once. It curled about him like a steaming towel. He looked at Mia. There were circles under her eyes. Her hair was tangled, her tunic in threads. "Poor kid," he said.

Bemmelman glanced at his watch. "Your men should be up in the clouds now, waiting? Eh, Cosmo?"

Cosmo said: "They'll be up there."

"We'll give them another hour," said Bemmelman, "to be on the safe side." He rang for a servant, ordered breakfast served in the office.

They picked at their food listlessly when it arrived. Bemmelman kept glancing at his watch. At length, he stood up, turned to the slave girl. "Call the Security Patrol, Llana."

Cosmo frowned, but said nothing.

"What should I tell them?" asked Llana snapping on the telecast.

"Get hold of the Commissioner. Tell him we've caught the Renegade." He chuckled amiably. "That should make him sit up. Yes sir. Tell him to get right out here, though, because the Renegade's men are trying to rescue him."

A girl's features, horsefaced, blonde, formed on the screen. "Venusport Security Patrol," she said.

"The Commissioner," said Llana. "This is the Bemmelman plantation calling."

The screen blanked out as the horsefaced girl switched to the Commissioner's office. In a moment, the fat face and shoulders of the Commissioner blotted out half the screen. His eyes were puffy. His jowls sagged. He looked as if he were suffering from a hangover.

"Well?" he asked.

"We've captured the Renegade."

"What?" His eyes snapped open.

"We've got the Renegade here at the plantation. But hurry! His men are trying to rescue him. Please hurry!"

"I'm on my way!"

The Commissioner leaped out of vision forgetting to shut off the telecast. They could hear his bull-like voice roaring orders. Llana snapped off the machine, turned indifferently to the windows.

Bemmelman chuckled, said, "Keep your eyes on Miss MacIver, Llana. Don't let Sofi go galavanting around either." He took the chains off Cosmo's ankles, but left his hands manacled. Next he went to his desk, took out a dart gun. He said, "Come along," to Cosmo and led the way into the corridor.

THEY didn't go through the trap this time, but up in the tower where a door gave directly onto the flat roof. Cosmo saw that the chamber just inside the door was jammed with naked blue giants and Venusian serfs.

A tall, black eyed Martian, foppishly dressed in spite of the heat came to meet them. He wrinkled his nose at the stale odor of sweat already thick in the room, picked his way through the men.

"I didn't deploy them on the roof," he said in the sibilant accent of the Red Planet, "because there's no cover. They'd be spotted at once. They can rush the Renegade's men through the door." He examined Cosmo curiously.

Bemmelman rubbed his hands together, said: "That's right, Rabaul. Yes sir, I'm glad you thought of that." He glanced through the door at the low swirling cloud mass, then turned back to Cosmo. "Get out on the roof. Whistle 'em down. No tricks, now."

Cosmo stepped through the door into the hot, dim daylight. He glanced aloft, put two fingers in his mouth, whistled loudly. He had trouble managing the cuffs, but he blew again and again.

His eyes swept the heavens, but no sign of bird or plane appeared through the veiling clouds.

"What's wrong?" called Bemmelman in a low nervous voice.

Cosmo shook his head. He put his fingers back in his mouth, whistled until he was red in the face. He might as well have whistled for a wind.

Bemmelman stamped out of the tower. He scoured the low roof of clouds, an ominous glitter in his pig-like eyes.

"Where are they?"

"You know as much about it as I do." Cosmo shrugged. "They're not there or they'd come down."

"If you're tricking me . . ."

"How the hell would I be tricking you?" Cosmo asked irritably. "You heard me give my orders over the telecast. They're not there, that's all. And I'm damn glad they're not!"

The planter continued to stare at him suspiciously. Cosmo could feel his plan hanging precariously in the balance, then Bemmelman said: "It doesn't matter, I suppose. They can be rounded up later. The Security Patrol will be here any moment." He shoved Cosmo ahead of him into the tower.

Cosmo let his breath escape evenly. He could feel little beads of sweat on his forehead.

The red faced planter slipped the dart gun out of his pocket. "Rabaul," he ordered grumpily; "Get the men back to their quarters."

The Martian elevated his eyebrows, but Bemmelman vouchsafed no explanation. The planter watched his overseer herd the men down the stair, then turned to Cosmo as the last of the Jovians were disappearing. The dart gun dangled in his fist at his side. His eyes were mean.

"Get a move on," he said sharply. "All right," said Cosmo. He was right beside the planter.

In that instant Bemmelman sensed danger. His eyes widened. He tried to whip up the dart gun. Then Cosmo's manacles smashed the planter along side the head.

It was a terrible blow. The red faced slave breeder caved to the floor as if his bones had turned to jelly. For a moment, Cosmo thought he'd killed him. He stooped, found Bemmelman's pulse. It was weak but steady. Grim lipped, he leaped back to the roof.

Cursing his manacles, Cosmo fumbled a whistle from his pocket. He wet his lips, blew. As the time he'd summoned the Ormoo to carry off Mia, the high shrill note was inaudible to human ears.

Bemmelman, Cosmo thought grimly, had been a bit too clever. The planter had heard him say whistle over the telecast. It hadn't occurred to him that the Ormoo might be trained only to notes in the higher register.

He glanced aloft. The cloud blanket began to boil suddenly. Then the Ormoo plummeted soundlessly to the roof. Big Unse, the blue star of the Forzoql caste tattooed on his yellow forehead, his face split by a grin, leaped silently from its back.

The bird stretched out its beak, rubbed it against Cosmo's leg.

"Quick!" said Big Unse. "On to the bird. We'll be spotted in a minute."

Cosmo shook his head, watching a surface plane, nose cautiously down from the clouds. "There's a girl below stairs."

Big Unse scowled in disgust. "Why," he asked practically, "do you have to have that particular one?"

The surface plane came to rest lightly beside the Ormoo. The door was flung open and eight men piled out, weapons in their hands. There was no word spoken. Five were swarthy Venusian serfs. There was the yellow eyed Mercurian, bland, smiling unarmed. There was Natal, the traitorous Martian, and the blue Jovian.

"We're going to get a girl," said Big Unse.

Cosmo slapped the Ormoo on the side. It launched itself silently into the air. "The plane won't be noticed," he said; "but that bird would catch the eye of a

dead man." He nodded toward the tower. Like wolves they followed him silently inside.

"The manacles." Cosmo's voice was low as he held out his arms. "Bemmelman has the key."

Big Unse dropped beside the unconscious planter. He dug out the key, unlocked Cosmo's wrists.

"Put them on Bemmelman," said Cosmo. As soon as the planter was securely cuffed, he said, "pick him up. Bring him along."

THEY crept down the stairs, fanned out like hunting dogs. Without appearing to do so, Cosmo kept Natal, the spy, under observation. They reached the corridor, started for the office. A serf came out of a bisecting passage. He saw them, drew back, tried to yell. Two of the Venusians were on him like tigers. They clamped a hand over his mouth, held him so that he couldn't wriggle.

Cosmo said, "Bring him along too."

Big Unse put his face down close to the serf's, said, "Don't cry out, or by the star on my forehead, I'll skin you alive."

The serf's eyes rolled. He nodded vigorously trying to convey his absolute willingness to cooperate.

There was a faint amused gleam in Cosmo's eyes. He paused before the office, then slid the panel back.

Mia and the Blue Venus, still manacled, stumbled to their feet. Llana, the slave woman jerked around from the windows, her jaw dropping. Then she bit her lip, glanced at the button on the glassite desk.

"Stay away from the desk, Llana," Cosmo admonished her. He stood aside, allowed his men to file into the office. They deposited Bemmelman on the sofa. Cosmo saw that Natal was safely inside, shut the door. At his nod, Big Unse unlocked both the girls.

Mia said: "But . . . but . . ." Then a look of fright wiped away the relief on her wide gray eyes. "The Security Patrol! Cosmo, they'll be here any moment! Please Cosmo, don't let them catch you!"

The buzzer on the telecast began to sound.

"It's too late." Cosmo smiled grimly. "I've a hunch that's the Security Patrol now." He turned to the Terran slave girl, said: "Llana, string along with me,

and I'll promise that both you and your daughter are provided with passage to Earth."

The telecast continued to buzz impatiently.

"My daughter!" The slave girl clapped her hand to her mouth. "You know."

"I've suspected," he corrected her. "There's a resemblance. So Sofi really is your daughter."

Mia looked from the Blue Venus to Llana in bewilderment. There didn't seem to be over five years difference in their ages. "It's . . . it's impossible!" she blurted out.

The Blue Venus smiled enigmatically.

Cosmo said: "I thought, Llana, that Sofi was the hold Bemmelman had over you."

At mention of the planter's name Llana stiffened. "He'll kill Sofi if I betray him!"

Cosmo shook his head.

"You haven't any evidence against him," she insisted. "Even if you had, they wouldn't believe the Renegade."

"Exactly," said Cosmo. "Answer the telecast, Llana."

Her face set. She went to the audio, switched it on.

"The Security Patrol is here," came Rabaul's voice. "What shall I do with them?"

Llana glanced deadfaced at Cosmo, who said in an undertone: "Tell him to send the Commissioner here. Have his men served with refreshments."

She repeated the orders tonelessly into the telecast.

"Right," said Rabaul. The instrument went dead.

Cosmo went behind the glassite desk, sat down. He leveled his dart gun straight at Natal, the Martian.

"Natal," he said in a cold manner. "Bemmelman sold you down the river. He told me you were his spy."

The Martian blanched, but his black eyes were hard as marbles. "I should have guessed the pig would betray me."

"Get his gun, Big Unse," said Cosmo.

The Fazoql catfooted behind the Martian, relieved him of his weapon.

"Follow my lead," said Cosmo to Natal, concealing the dart gun up his sleeve. "Because, so help me, if you don't, you're a dead Martian."

Natal nodded, stiff faced but willing.

Bemmelman groaned, sat up. He regarded the scene in disbelief. Then his little pig eyes narrowed. He didn't say anything and Cosmo ignored him.

There was a knock on the door.

"That's the Commissioner," said Cosmo. "Let him in, Big Unse."

Mia looked wretched, frightened. "No," she said and bit her lip to stifle the rest of the protest.

Big Unse slid back the panel.

The fat commissioner waddled inside. He was even fatter than he appeared over the visoscreen. He bulged in his clothes like a sausage.

"Well, Hal," he began in a hearty voice, "you lucky dog. The fifty thou . . ." The words stuck in his throat. He stared at the hard faced green eyed man behind the desk, at Bemmelman in irons. He revolved slowly, taking in the silent men about the walls, the three girls. "Wh-what's this?" He sputtered, but there was a sick, frightened look in his eyes. "Where's the Renegade?"

"There he is, Commisisoner," replied Cosmo dryly. "All done up in irons." He pointed at Bemmelman lying manacled on the sofa.

VIII

BEMMELMAN was the first to recover his voice. His neck swelled. He laughed hoarsely. "Nobody's fool enough to believe I'm the Renegade, Cosmo."

"You're crazy, young man," the Commissioner burst out as he caught his breath. "If this is a joke, it's in remarkably poor taste."

"It's no joke." Cosmo's eyes hardened.

"You lying rogue," Bemmelman shouted. "This has gone far enough. There's your Renegade, Commissioner."

"Keep him quiet, Big Unse," said Cosmo softly, "until I finish. He can talk his head off then."

Big Unse doubled his fist, shook it in Bemmelman's face. The planter subsided, but a cunning gleam winked in his little brown eyes.

The Commissioner drew a handkerchief from his pocket, dabbed at his forehead. He sank into a chair with a groan. "Talk

fast, young man," he said. "And it had better be good." He eyed Cosmo with obvious distrust.

Cosmo took a moisture-proof cigarette case from his pocket, snapped it open. "I realize, Commissioner, this must be quite a shock. Bemmelman's been powerful in politics. He has allies in high places. But when they learn he's the Renegade, they'll be the first to disown him." He took a cigarette out of the case, eyed it critically, put it back. "Even rats," he added, glancing up at the Commissioner, "have sense enough to leave a sinking ship."

"Um," said the Commissioner. He looked discomfited, shot a sly glance at the manacled planter.

Bemmelman started to roar a protest, but Big Unse grinned, shook his hammer like fist in his face.

"I'd better sketch in his background," said Cosmo judicially. "He was an organic chemist on Earth, but got involved in a forgery case. He next showed up smuggling Jovian primitives to Venus. The T.I.S. got on his trail, but they were never able to pin anything on him."

"How do you know all this?" the Commissioner asked.

"You don't need to take my word. It's all in the records. You can investigate them yourself."

"Um," said the Commissioner again and dabbed at his forehead. He purposefully avoided Bemmelman's eye.

Cosmo glanced at Mia who was regarding him in sheer amazement. He smiled at her, said: "Bemmelman figured it'd be safer to breed slaves here on Venus rather than run the risk of capture by the Empire's Patrol Spacers. But he found that land on Venus can't be bought except in rare cases." He paused, looked at the apoplectic slave breeder.

"Bemmelman murdered my father having first provided himself with forged notes to the plantation. You'll remember, he was mixed up with a forgery case on Earth."

"Why-why," the Commissioner sputtered indignantly, "that's preposterous."

"Here are the notes." Cosmo pulled two packets of papers from his pocket, tossed them to the Commissioner's lap. "You'll find notes for old MacIver's plantation there, too. Bemmelman had decided to grab it off too."

The fat Commissioner examined them curiously.

"They're good," said Cosmo. "But it won't be too hard to prove they're forgeries."

The Commissioner rustled the papers. "But what's all this to do with the Renegade? I came out here to collar him, not rattle old bones."

Cosmo pointed his right hand lazily at Natal, the Martian spy. It was the arm with the dart gun up its sleeve. Natal blanched.

"Ask him," said Cosmo blandly. "He's one of the Renegade's men."

Everyone stared at the Martian.

"Well?" thundered the Commissioner.

"Natal wanted to quit. Bemmelman had tried to sell him out." Cosmo subtly reminded the Martian of the planter's treachery. "He came to me."

"Why to you?" the Commissioner wanted to know.

"He knew I was trying to prove Bemmelman murdered my father and mother and stole my plantation." Cosmo shrugged, added in a pointed tone. "I told him that if he would—ah—share his information with you, Commissioner, that the two of you could split the fifty thousand monad reward. I'd be satisfied with regaining my plantation."

The fat Commissioner's eyes shone with cupidity. He and the astounded Martian exchanged glances.

Bemmelman, who hadn't missed this by-play, roared and half flung himself from the sofa.

"He's trying to frame me!"

THE Commissioner regarded Bemmelman with a frown. Then he turned away, asked in a changed voice: "Will Natal go on the witness stand?"

"Go ahead, Natal," said Cosmo.

Natal ran the tip of his tongue over his thin lips. He gave Bemmelman a venomous glance, said: "He's the Renegade all right. We holed up in the Cloud Mountains. Bemmelman gave us our orders, for the most part, over a special frequency radio phone. He never let anyone here on the plantation guess he was the Renegade. He played a dual role."

"A Jekyll and Hyde role," interposed Cosmo smoothly.

"Lies! Lies!" shouted Bemmelman.

The Commissioner ignored him, kept his eyes on Natal. "You can show us the hideout?"

"Certainly."

"What about the other men?"

"They escaped," Cosmo interposed, quickly.

"Um," said the Commissioner. He didn't appear anxious to pursue that line.

"Natal's not the only witness," said Cosmo. He pointed at Mia. "The Renegade kidnapped Miss MacIver. She tried to reach you by telecast."

"She did!" The Commissioner enthusiastically smacked his right fist in his left palm. "By heaven, she did! But when my men got there, he'd gotten away with her."

"I don't think she'll object to taking the witness stand either," said Cosmo in a thoughtful voice. "After all, Bemmelman murdered her father."

"No." Mia's voice was so low that the Commissioner had to bend forward to hear her. "No. I won't mind being a witness. Bemmelman kidnapped me."

"I didn't kidnap her. I rescued her from the Renegade." The sweat was pouring from the planter's forehead.

The girl's head jerked up. She said in a ringing voice, "Then how do you explain this?" and exposed the brand on her shoulder.

The Commissioner's eyes started from their sockets.

"You might call the head overseer and check on Bemmelman's movements," suggested Cosmo.

The Commissioner nodded.

Llana switched on the telecast. "Rabaul," she said, "the Commissioner wants you in the office."

"Right," came the voice of the Martian.

"There's the safe, too," said Cosmo.

The Commissioner heaved himself from his chair, waddled across to Bemmelman.

"What's the combination, Hal?"

The planter's little eyes were bloodshot. Obscenity burst from his mouth.

A laugh rumbled up from the Commissioner's belly, shook all three of his chins. "You're done for, Hal. What's the combination?"

Grudgingly Bemmelman told him. "But you won't find anything there," he added

vindictively. "I'm going to sink you."

Cosmo opened the safe, waved the Commissioner forward to investigate.

"Um," said the Commissioner in disappointment, leafing through the papers. "Maybe we can dig something incriminating out of this mess. I don't know. Hey! What's this?" He held up the paper upon which Bemmelman had written the directions for reaching the Ormoo's feeding ground. "Looks like a map!"

"It is a map," replied Cosmo grimly. "I wouldn't be surprised if it isn't the location of the loot from the plantations Bemmelman's men have raided."

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," snapped the excited Commissioner.

The Martian overseer stalked into the office, glanced about him in surprise.

"Tell these fools I'm not the Renegade!" Bemmelman roared.

Rabaul regarded his employer blankly. "You're certainly not the Renegade so far as I know."

"Of course not," interrupted the Commissioner. "We don't expect you to be able to identify him. We only want to ask you a few questions."

The Martian pursed his lips, shrugged. "Anything I know, Commissioner."

"Where was Bemmelman yesterday morning?"

"I don't know." The Martian overseer looked surprised. "He left in his surface plane in the direction of the MacIver plantation."

"Alone?"

Rabaul nodded.

"Um. Has he ever received messages from the Cloud Mountains? Radio calls?"

"Yes," admitted Rabaul grudgingly. "Though I can't tell you what they're about. I've instructions to call him immediately the call signals come through. He takes them personally."

"Have you ever known him to make trips into the mountains?"

Again the Martian nodded. "Yes. He's made expeditions into them after botanical specimens, I believe."

"We got him!" said the Commissioner and Cosmo could see him counting his half of the reward. "That map is the most damning evidence of all. It's in his handwriting, isn't it?"

"You can have it checked," said Cosmo complacently. "But there's one thing more."

"Eh?"

"Motive."

COSMO'S face hardened. "Slaves aren't cattle. After Bemmelman started his slave farm he couldn't expect profits for eighteen years. He needed money, lots of money to carry on certain experiments. He was an organic chemist. He believed it possible to force humans the same way a gardener forces plants. An aging process isn't a new idea, but it took Bemmelman to find a commercial use for it."

"It fits like a glove," said the Commissioner, "but how do you know about the experiment?"

"I can tell you about the experiments," interposed Llana suddenly.

Everyone stared at her.

She bit her lip. "I'm a Terran. He—he kidnapped me, mated me with a Dawn Man as an experiment. Sofi is my daughter."

"Not a bad experiment," said the Commissioner admiringly. His eyes ran over the Blue Venus.

"That was only the beginning!" said Llana. "I found out he's got a laboratory below stairs where he's constantly experimenting with the slave children. He's obsessed with the scheme of maturing the children quicker so that he can reap faster profits. Bemmelman is a monster."

"Go on," said the Commissioner eagerly.

"He—he succeeded at last."

"What do you mean?"

Llana pointed at the Blue Venus. "Sofi," she said in a low voice. "Sofi is only seven years old!"

Absolute silence gripped the room.

"You'll swear to that?" asked the Commissioner at length.

"Of course. Half the serfs in the house know her age anyway."

"We've got him," cried the Commissioner jubilantly. "We've got him dead to rights."

"It's a frame up," shouted Bemmelman in despair. "A dirty frame up, I tell you."

Cosmo regarded the planter with opaque green eyes. "Save your breath, Bemmelman," he counseled him dryly. "No one's

going to believe the Renegade—remember?"

From the flat roof of the manor house, Cosmo and Mia watched the Security Patrol planes take off one by one for Venusport. The head overseer was to take charge of the plantation until the courts confirmed Cosmo's claims. Llana and Sofi planned to visit Earth after Bemmelman's trial.

Cosmo had taken Big Unse aside, sent him off secretly with the men to destroy any evidence in their hideout. They were to return to the plantation. "I want the lot of you under my eyes," Cosmo had explained with a grin, "where you won't be tempted to raid my plantation."

As the last of the Patrol Planes rose from the roof, Cosmo turned to Mia. "That's finis for the Renegade!"

"Bemmelman isn't the Renegade, really?" said Mia, half in doubt. "Is he?"

"Maybe not *the* Renegade," grinned Cosmo, "but he's certainly a renegade."

Mia gulped suddenly, said, "The map! Good heavens! What will the Commissioner do when he doesn't find anything but bird food?"

"Bird food, the devil," Cosmo said dryly. "I haven't the remotest idea where the Ormoos feed. That map will lead him straight to the spot where I've hidden every stick of loot I've—ah—accumulated." He pulled the Ormoo's whistle from his pocket.

Mia eyed it in alarm. "What are you going to do?"

"Take you to Venusport." He blew twice on the whistle. "We're going before the registrar today!"

"But Cosmo. Not on that—that monstrosity. I refuse to do it. I won't go." There was a disturbance in the cloud blanket directly overhead. A huge gray shape plunged Venusward. "Besides," she added in haste; "I can't go to Venusport like this—can I?"

"We'll stop by your plantation, spruce up a bit."

The Ormoo lit with a thud. It gave a pleased raucous squawk, eyed them with amiable red brown eyes.

"Oh well," said Mia between her teeth. "I might as well get used to traveling on the darn thing, I suppose."



THE VIZIGRAPH

You can't please all of the people! That's what they say. Well, let's see if we can prove the pessimists wrong.

We've packed this Spring Issue of PLANET with a variety of every flavor. Old authors, and new. Science and fantasy and adventure. Art work that ranges from action and spice to mood. We've gone overboard in an attempt to give you an issue that is really comprehensive.

Let's have a reaction, will you, guys and gals? Don't spare the whip. Blast away with anything you have in mind, so long as it is in good taste. Double-space your lines. One side of the page written on. Two-page limit.

Incidentally—believe it or not, the story by Noel Loomis in this issue was written before the announcement of the atomic bomb. PLANET's own scoop on the world, we call it. We predict that a good part of Mr. Loomis' story will some day be history.

Coming back to the Vizigraph, if the following three winners will drop a card indicating their choices of originals from the Fall Issue, their pics will be forwarded immediately.

1, Lewis Sherlock. 2, Lionel Inman. 3, George R. Fox.
Okay. Enough said. Let's get down to business.

C. W.

ON SPEED AND TIME

426 Broadway
Lynn, Massachusetts

DEAR EDITOR:

In regard to the disagreement of Mr. Sherlock and Mr. Sigler, concerning the ultimate velocity, I believe I may be able to add a few points.

To begin with there are two aspects of the problem that seemingly are in contradiction, but which mesh upon admitting one of the principal aspects of Einstein's theory.

The first fact is that speeds faster than light are impossible according to the Theory of Relativity. Deny this, and you deny the Theory. Considering the success of the recent atomic research based upon Einstein's formulae, and considering Einstein's success in prognosticating an "error" in Mercury's revolution about the Sun, one would be rash to deny the Theory or the light-velocity limit.

The second fact is that according to all the laws of physics (which have never been denied by Einstein) a given number of footpounds applied to a given mass over a given period of time will produce a calculable acceleration in the direction of application. Therefore an object with the power to accelerate at low speeds will likewise be able to accelerate at speeds nearing or equaling the speed of light.

How then to conciliate these apparently contradictory facts. Here the basic premises of Relativity comes to the rescue. Is it possible for an object to be traveling at a speed of light or faster according to the space-time frame standard from which it started,



and yet seem to be traveling at a speed lower than the speed of light by every possible physical means of determining speed. To the object itself, the space-time variance resulting from the variance in velocity will be just enough to make the object's speed, as measured by the Mickelson-Morley method, a naught. Also due to the space-time frame differences, an observer at any other place or time would calculate a speed less than that of light.

Therefore if an object accelerated at one thousand miles per second per day for a year, at the end of the year it would be going three hundred sixty-five miles per second, which on a graph would be a straight line rising above the speed of light. But to an observer on let us say Earth, the speed would approach the speed of light at a slower and slower light. If the first line ever reached infinite speed; the second would reach the light speed. Meanwhile the object's own measurable speed would remain at zero.

To illustrate this a little more, if an object accelerated at three times the pull of gravity for four years, decelerated for four years, turned around, accelerated for another four years, and finally decelerated four years, sixteen years, would have passed on Earth. But because of the fact the object's average speed would be so much greater than the speed of light, that its time scale would have been altered to such an extent, that only about four years and two months would have passed for the object itself.

This, by the way, is of particular interest because it is the only way to "time travel." Also, other than the hyperspace theories now emerging, it is the only means of inter-stellar travel even to our nearest neighbor in the practical span of a lifetime.

Yours,

ARTHUR J. BRYANT.

(Ed. Note: Thank you, Mr. Bryant, for an interesting, convincing and well-written letter.)

MORE SPEED

400 Ontario Street,
Wheeling, W. Va.

DEAR EDITOR:

I would like to offer some more "disagreeing comment" to Mr. Sherlock's opinions on the ultimate in the field of material velocity. Since I missed the issue in which they first appeared, I do not know to what extent my own views will disagree, but in view of those that appeared in the Winter issue, I feel that they will.

To put it into a few words, my claim is that the velocity of light is constant only in relation to its source or point of reflection. This was indicated some time ago by an experiment performed by Prof. Michelson. The experiment was aimed at either proving or disproving the existence of a stationary ether and the results were taken as an indication that there was no such element. It was reasoned that if the earth were moving through a stationary ether, an ether stream would be set up parallel to the earth's motion, and that a beam of light would take longer to travel up this stream and back than it would across and back. In the experiment, the distance the beam of light was sent was the same in each direction and so was the time required. Now this is easily understood, if we admit that the speed of light is not constant in relation to the ether. When sent up the stream, the speed was reduced by the opposite motion of the source, this change being rectified by the motion

of the reflecting surface in the same direction as that of the source. The return reversed the process.

It is my belief that momentum of material bodies is caused by the same conditions of the ether as those which produce light waves. Since the ether permeates all space and matter, the atoms of a body traveling through it act as the depressions of waves while the more dense element between them act as the crests. The only difference in light waves is that the depressions do not contain the complicated structure of atoms. It has been shown that light can travel slightly faster or slower than the accepted speed, then why not matter? The problem may lie only in finding a driving force that will maintain effectiveness at such speeds.

The speed of light is constant in relation to its source. It is not constant in relation to the ether. Mr. Sherlock is wrong. Mr Sigler is wrong. They are both right. Or am I wrong?

Now I would like to thank all parties responsible for the great improvements in this mag in the last two years. This is my first PLANET STORIES since I entered the Army over two years ago, but it *won't* be my last.

I have one suggestion. That is for the authors to make their stories sound a little more logical. Take *Passage to Planet X* for instance. Here we had two gravities. This would mean two different sets of conditions. The dense air of the "heavy" side would constantly rush across the twilight zone with great force, sending the lighter air up where it could be drawn back into the heavy side. It would be like a "tired twister" lying down. I don't think one could do much fighting in that area even if the Perlacs, born in and adapted to the heavy gravity and its particular conditions, were as much at home on the light side as the story indicates. Just the same, I enjoyed *Passage to Planet X* exceptional as I did the others. I read for relaxation, not for fault-finding.

Sincerely,

BILL OBERFIELD.

OF WAVES AND WAVES

Box 6, Helena, Montana.

DEAR EDITOR:

The cover, probably due to the use of lighter colors and a smoother appearance, achieves a somewhat more pleasing impression than usual. But it's still far from ideal. How about at least trying a real stf cover—one with space ships and a real space scene?

McDowell improved tremendously in *The Great Green Blight*, but why were Murphy's pics ever accepted? How long have you had *Passage to Planet X* in your files? 'Tis said that The Hasse Volume contains his last works of stf, so this must be even older. The "faultless logic" in *Venusian Invader* bolstered its position considerably. Or perhaps my view is influenced by the fact E. E. Smith often used super-logic in his excellent Lensmen epics. In *The Diversifal*, Rocklynne continues to murder his ideas—too bad he can't handle them like van Vogt, Frederic Brown or Harry Walton. By the way, somebody surely misinformed Kiemle. The bem is *not* the acme of stf art.

If you wish a lengthier review of your mag, look up my column, Concentrated Opinion, in future issues of the fanzine *Fanews*.

Thanks for the note about Sternig's *Scrap-Iron* but how about reprinting it in PLANET?

So you're beginning to wonder what PLANET will do when Science catches up with it? Well, how about more of the intergalactic, hyperspatial, sub-space, and extra-dimensional type stories? Science probably won't catch up on those for a while. And *please* don't leave out the imaginative theory sections of such stories. Ideas are the life of stf.

As for letters, George Fox really *deserves* first place. Give Henry Elsner Jr. number two spot and Evelyn Vogt number three.

So you want takers for Sherlock. I'm no authority but I'd like to raise one question: Is it true or not that radio waves and light waves and perhaps some other waves are just different frequency manifestations of the same thing? I'm sure we realize that light waves are much shorter than radio waves. Let us consider an analogy. Sound waves and supersonic waves are both manifestations of vibration, but at different frequencies. We know that the normal sound waves are longer than the supersonics, but who will venture to say that the sound waves travel faster than the supersonics? Do you see my point? (Ed.: No. But go right ahead. I was thinking of a different type WAVE.)

As for Sigler's forecasts, I would expect quicker action than he does. This age we are living in is mighty fast, and speeding up all the time.

Now back to Fox's excellent letter. He charges you with giving us futuristic westerns and such in PLANET. (Is your conscience bothering you?) Perhaps you feel PLANET should deal in the adventurous type story, but don't you think a spice of scientific theory here and there would make for improvement? I believe the Sherlock-Sigler controversy was started over Sherlock's complaint that stf contained stories wherein the speed of light was exceeded and he didn't feel that was scientific. Surely ways and means of surpassing light speed has brought about some of the greatest stf classics of all time. For where would stf be if we put a limit on our authors that way? Practically saying, "You can't leave the solar system." Science doesn't know everything yet.

Surely it would be much better to raise the kick that stf is going unscientific on us in presenting the neighboring planets as having satisfactory atmospheres for our comfort and well-being. Such is not the picture science has painted of our neighborly worlds. Let us first do away with the camels we've been swallowing before we try straining the gnats out of our stf diet.

Now to Fox's criticism of your art. Surely you'll have to admit some of your art is highly unsatisfactory. Don't you think stf fans appreciate good art? However, let us hope that with the war cleaned up, we can look for a real improvement.

I feel the Visigraph would be considerably improved if the editor (or someone) would at least make some comment or reply to every letter. In a sensible and serious vein, that is. As for something to discuss, how about each fan bringing forth his opinions as to what makes an ideal stf tale. Surely something interesting would come out of that.

Regarding his suggestion of additional departments, I, for one, am in favor of it. The fanzine reprint department definitely has its problems for I suppose you would be somewhat averse to printing material which in any way advertised your competitors but perhaps something worth-

while can be worked out. I hope I have said something of constructive nature.

Stiffthusiastically yours,

WALTER A. COSLET.

ONE FOGGY FAN

3325 Georgia Ave.,
Washington 10, D. C.

DEAR EDITOR:

In the Vizigraph section of the winter issue of PS quite a few people complained that the section was getting too—too—dull. Nataly, look who is writing in it!

I'm inclined to believe that the winter issue of PLANET STORIES was rather good, but—to copy everyone else—Oh! what a cover! Now, mind you, I didn't say I didn't like it, but it shames me to carry it down the street. Other than that, I have only one complaint. Can't you get an ink that will stay on the paper. I read a few pages (50-60-61-62), look at my hands, and they are blood red, or bright yellow, depending on the type of sky you are using that issue.

What do you say to starting an argument? What's there to argue about now days? If you are awake, what's wrong with the following paragraph?

Nothing can go faster than a car! Let's suppose that a car can go from here to there in a certain length of time. Let's suppose this *thing* which can, supposedly, go faster than a car can go from here to there in five minutes less than it takes the car. If it takes the car four minutes, this *thing* gets there before it leaves! For example, if the car left at 2:00 p.m., it would arrive at 2:04 p.m., but the *thing* would get there, assuming at the same time, in five minutes less than 2:04 p.m., or at 1:59, one minute before it left! Therefore, nothing can go faster than a car, or anything, for that matter.

I know that sounds silly, but I've heard it used in telling why nothing could go faster than light.

Sincerely,

MARVIN MAXWELL.

FRICTION ON THE EYES

Covington, Ky.

DEAR EDITOR:

The old Corona Four has been clamoring for action from the moment my tired eyes discovered that the Battle Cry being raised by Mr. Sherlock for the Emancipation of Radium. Had this movement been started earlier, we might have secured a seat for the duly elected representatives of Radium at the San Francisco Conference. Perhaps there will be another conference at another time, and we can then correct for the omission?

I missed Mr. Sigler's challenging letter as well as Mr. Sherlock's published opinions on the ultimate in the field of material velocities. For all practical purposes, the Lorentz-FitzGerald Contraction hypothesis holds true, but when we extend this hypothesis into the field of abstract reasoning we must also include the observations made by Coulomb during his experimental work in determining the laws of friction. The point at which sliding friction becomes rolling friction needs considerable enlargement before we can fix an ultimate velocity for any particular material.

Since the friction between two surfaces is slightly greater just before motion begins than when the surfaces are in steady relative motion, an absolute measurement of the initial velocities

becomes a physical impossibility. Furthermore, all of our sensitive measuring instruments are inherently dependent upon some effect of friction, so that Contact Potentials come into the picture at the very instant when accuracy is of the utmost importance.

In order to measure the velocity of light we must first determine its relative mass and direction of travel. An automobile driven across a weighing instrument at sixty miles per hour exerts considerably less pressure upon the scales than when standing motionless, since its applied weight is not all in that direction for which the scale is designed. It has been relatively easy to measure the elapsed time in which light will travel between two measured points, but we have not yet arrived at its exact velocity simply because we do not know the exact course it pursues.

In other words, a wobbling wheel travels something more than a mile in carrying the automobile a mile's distance. This is comparable to wave motion, so that the 300,000 kilometer per second figure for light might conceivably be a measure of the distance traversed by light during the time it requires to reach a point 299,820 kilometers away? Since wavelength seems to be related to color, how can you reconcile the facts with the claim that their velocities are equal?

The atomic bomb has already revised the laws of several scientific fields, even though the rank and file may not come to a realization of this fact for several years. Would any thinking person dismiss it from his mind as being nothing more than the extension of some previously published theory on the behavior of atoms in general?

I would like very much to get in on the discussion, but I am somewhat handicapped by not having a copy of the first letters raising the points of issue. Will someone kindly supply me with this missing information?

In the meantime I would suggest that both Mr. Sigler and Mr. Sherlock give serious consideration to the implied, but cleverly disguised, straight-line theory of Mr. Gardner F. Fox in *MANth*. Do we know of anything which will adhere to such an absolutely straight line of travel that it cannot be deflected? If so, how will we detect it and measure its force?

Sincerely yours,

ROBERT A. BRADLEY.

P.S. Incidentally, I am probably just another enthusiastic screwball.

(Ed. Note: No comment on that.)

GULLIVER

507 N. Oak Street
Normal, Illinois

DEAR SIR:

I seldom feel the urge to try anything so unprofitable as correcting other people's bad taste, but I can't resist elbowing my way into the argument about Kipling. For myself I know of no better science fiction stories than his two *With the Night Mail* and *As Easy as A B C*. The other "magazine excerpts" with the former are really delicious, and Kipling's guess that dirigibles would prove superior to airplanes was certainly justified by the technical situation at that time.

Kipling himself was one of the most mechanically minded authors who ever lived, as indicated by such stories as *The Ship that Found Herself*. He did not confine himself to India in his later stories, but created tales of all sorts—*They* in the tone of Henry James and the Badalia Herods-

foot story dealing with London slums in the tone of Arthur Morrison, for instance. I question certain of his social tendencies—the anti-gregariousness of *As Easy as A B C* or the happy Fascist state in *The Army of a Dream*. But few men have ever had such an experimental mind, or such versatility and skill in phrasing. He did very creditably in all aspects from humor to terror, while poor Poe's attempts at humor are pretty revolting. Personally, if I could ever bring off symbolism like *Children of the Zodiac*, fantasy like *On the Gate*, or that perfectly marvellous conversation between Hal o' the Draft and the country contractor in one of the stories in *Rewards and Fairies*—two diverse men who could understand each other through their common love of honest craftsmanship—I'd call myself a good writer. Mowgli with all his faults is so far above Tarzan as to be in a different world. (In his autobiography, Kipling says he understood that Tarzan's author was trying to see how *bad* a story could be written and sold.). It is harder to write a good fairy tale than practically anything else in the world—something pleasing both children and adults. I know, for I have tried without success. I have quite a file of science-fiction, and I like it, but I'd lose it all to keep *The Elephant Child*.

I won't insist that everybody has to like Kipling, but I think that even those who do not should give him credit for his virtues. Incidentally I'll nominate *MacDonald's Hymn* as the best poem of science-fiction so far produced. Poe's simple, direct, and precise language was indeed excellent, especially when compared with the diffuse drivellings of the popular authors of his day, but he was an essentially limited man, great in certain fields, yet with a "machine made" touch continually in the background. What a horrible world this would be if everything we had to read was as functional in design as good detective stories! Only creative minds of the first class dare to let their fancy run free with pleasing results to the reader; let us be thankful for them on the rare occasions when they appear.

Incidentally, I like your magazine. My favorite type of story is the sort presenting a social structure a bit different from ours, giving me points of reference to study our own—something like Gulliver. I don't go for costume westerns. I am repelled by the hero who can answer all the problems of a thousand years in two and a half days of hard work. I wish some of his ancestors were around now to help us with our present difficulties. That is what someone called the "Personal Devil theory of History" you know, and while a bit of escapist writing is soothing at times, it is likely to set us to looking for the Man on the White Horse when our country is in trouble.

Very truly yours,

JOSEPH M. WILSON.

MOST HORRED OFFENCE

113 N. Porter St.
Saginaw, Mich.

DEAR EDITOR:

In regard to Lionel Innman's letter: he has belittled the works of Kipling A nost ah horred offence. Maybe he thinks Tchaikovsky's work is trype because he likes moderem music.

As for PS;

I—Cover, same girl-guy-BEM them but the pic is not cluttered up with them and thet I lick. BEAUTIFUL.

2—STorys, better, improveing. I shall make no comment on any of them.

The Mad SFT Fan

BILL GROOVER.

(Ed. Note: Why don't you leave that poor Yrype-wrytere alone, Biill?)

GIVE THE BOY A ROCKET SHIP

1110 Live Oak St.
New Smyrna, Fla.

DEAR EDITOR:

This is my first letter to a mag, and I have a few suggestions to make. First, why not put the address to write to in the front part of Vizigraph? I may be just dumb, but to me it's kind of hard to decide where to write, so maybe some other fans are in the same condition. Second, could you give us a few rocket ships on the cover once in a while? Third, your stories are good but the novel is not long enough.

I enjoy your mag very much and have been reading it for about a year. The best stories of the Winter issue were:

(1) *The Great Green Blight*—only one gripe, the blight that destroyed the plant men was red.

(2) *Mannth*—This would have been better as a novel.

(3) *Steel Giants of Chaos*—a little confusing but good.

(4) *Passage to Planet X*—Fair.

(5) *Venusian Invader*—Fair, but one of those trick stories.

The other two weren't so hot.

Here's something—There's a "Law of Inertia" which states that if an object is pushed into motion it would move until the force of the air and friction stopped it, therefore if there was no air to stop it and cause friction it would go on forever. The space outside the Earth's atmosphere, commonly called "ether" is a vacuum. If a rocket generated enough speed to leave the Earth's atmosphere, it would continue at the same speed until it hit another planet's atmosphere. *Rockets would not be needed on space trips except for landings and take-offs, not used in space.* They could steer by rockets on top, sides, and bottom. If anybody wants to discuss this I will be glad to oblige.

If there are any fans in Florida, write to me.

Sincerely,

BRANSFORD LITTLETON.

YES, BUZZ OFF

Gibson's Landing,
B. C., Canada.

DEAR EDITOR:

With this letter, you can welcome a new Visi-fan to the ranks. PLANET rates high with me in the S.T.F. field

Now to the Winter issue. The best story in my opinion is *Mannth*. Mr. Fox is a "find," more stories by this author, please. *Green Blight* comes next, followed by *Passage to Planet X*. Both were swell stories, although the plots were not new. The rest were good, too, except for *Ultimate World*, which didn't appeal to me.

The illustrations for this issue were only so-so! Murphy's for the novel were about the best, although the pic by Pious on page 71 had a weird atmosphere that I like. Hollingsworth's on page 37 tied with Doolin's on 91 for worst place. The cover? Well, the less said about that, the better.

What's next? Oh yes, the Visigraph. Best letters were from Guy Trucano, Lionel Innsman

and Chad Oliver. Larry Shaw's little opus about the B.E.M. was amusing, too

Well, well, PLANET has a new editor. Congratulations, Mr. Whitehorn. Let's hope that with you at the helm, she will rise to greater heights.

I've heard an awful lot about the story *Vassals of the Master World*. If anyone has the issue with this story in and wishes to sell it please get in touch with me.

Ho, well, guess I'll buzz off now, but I'll be back again soon.

Sincerely,

PETER TROWER.

IN THIS CORNER—MR. ALNUTT

815 Louisa Street,
New Orleans 17, Louisiana.

DEAR EDITOR:

Strictly speaking, this is not a letter of comment on PLANET. Rather, I would like to air a few of my views on a currently running subject in the Visigraph.

When Al Weinstein stated that science-fiction would never compare with such great literature as Shakespeare's, I am inclined to believe he was mostly right. Surely no writer of the genre has been so successful to date. It is not impossible, but I think it will take the advent of a new school of writers, or a new trend in science—pseudo or real—to bring forth such works. The type of story presently being written just doesn't have that element of literary worth in it. It is entertaining, naturally, or you and I wouldn't read it, but "literature" never.

Now we come to the letter of one Lionel Innman. Firstly, sir, don't you think your own words lend themselves rather well to another point of view—"Greatness of an author's work is judged by what the majority thinks, and not by a minority like fandom."???? Well . . .

But to criticize further—Kipling, you say, wrote mere Indian "local color," and *The Jungle Book* is tripe, eh. Well . . . I wonder how your opinion would be received by the *Saturday Review of Literature*—crank, they might say, or perhaps literary moron. . . .

You ask us, too, to consider the works of Edgar Allen Poe. "Did he not write stf?" He did not—in any appreciable quantity, and certainly not of a quality that befitted the supernatural and fantasy stories upon which his fame rests.

"And then what about H. G. Wells." Surely even you do not seriously believe that H. G. Wells' success was made by his scientific romances. Not for nothing did he write *The Outline of History*, *Tono-Bungay*, *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, and the like. Of all his science-fiction tales, only *The Time Machine* comes close to winning an all-around fame.

As for G. K. Chesterton, if his name must be brought up (and I'd really rather not at all), do so in relationship to the medium in which he did dabble, fantasy. The same holds true for Merritt, Lovecraft, and Shakespeare.

This last seems to bring forth your main error, Mr. Innman, drifting away from the initial statement. Where Al Weinstein was concerned with science-fiction, in its relation to fine literature, you attempted to disprove him by referring to the works of fantasy, not science-fiction, authors.

And that is in itself an entirely different story, for no one ever denied fantasy its high place in literature. Many indeed are the authors whose fame was achieved wholly through the

medium of the fantasy story. Algernon Blackwood, M. R. James, M. P. Shiel, are but a few.

It is a shame indeed that science-fiction be limited almost wholly to the pulp field, for it does show promise, and, as I said before, the necessary alterations in style and subject might yet bring forth a truly great author or story.

Sincerely,

RICHARD W. ALNUTT.

POINT PROVER

DEAR EDITOR:

I was stirred from my lethargy by a number of things in the Winter issue of PLANET. Foremost on the list was the excellent fantasy of Rocklynne's, *The Diversifal*. One of the best tales to come out in any magazine at the present time. The plot was not exactly new, but the circumstances, treatment and writing were par excellence. It was fascinating.

The rest of the stories I consider hack, with the exception of *Man-nih*. It was an interesting idea, but the way in which the story was executed was rather amateurish. Too many loose ends floating about. I've noticed that about quite a lot of the newer crop of stories. Since it's got to be blamed on something, I suppose the war is good enough.

Then the Viz. Lewis Sherlock was interesting, and I vote him first. I confess, though, that I know little of the physical sciences. I do know enough to comprehend what Sherlock is talking about, but as for discussing his hypothesis, I'm afraid it's beyond me.

Howard G. Allen will have to wait quite a while before he sees Mason's Viz supplement. About all Mason can accomplish on that devil's machine of his is using an enormous amount of energy and ink, besides getting drunk on all the beer he consumes. Furthermore, he has a number of magazines to publish (most of them being published for the members of the Gilded Gremlin Press), and very little time in which to accomplish it.

Maybe I owe Mason an apology. I also get drunk on his beer.

I agree with papa Innman on a lot of the points he made. However, I still believe—and no amount of argument can change my mind—that for sheer educational and instructive value—and I'm not talking through my hat—any of the works termed "classics" beats any stf hero a mile. In the actual writing and mechanics of some of the novels and essays, I am inclined to agree with Innman. Poe is certainly a better writer than Kipling in forcefulness and directness of expression. But is that really the important side of the matter? Is a story about a bogey-man of more worth than Twain's (also a fantasy, by the way) *A Connecticut Yankee*, which tells forcefully of the social and political conditions in England at a certain time in her history? Weigh each one carefully; in that light I can't see how you can fail to agree with me, Lionel. In the mechanics of writing and/or the technics, you are right in some cases. But in actual worth? Never! A true classic, even the fantastic ones of Shakespeare which you mentioned, have a direct or indirect relationship with the solid, concrete things that make up our lives. But a true fantasy? Conceivably, but of what possible use could the story *The New Adam* be to me? The idea behind the story is possible, but not probable. Therefore, any use I could gain from it is, to repeat, possible, but extremely improbable. Except, as I mentioned before, when

pertaining to the science of writing. I hope I've proven my point. I could go on for pages and pages on all the fine points raised, but I think that what I've said will suffice to convey my meaning.

By the way, I vote Innman second place, because although I'm forced to disagree with him, he very ably stated his argument. In fact, I'll admit he had me pretty well stumped until I figured just *why* I thought that Kipling was better than Poe.

I guess that just about closes my letter. Besides a pat on the back to Gardner Fox, who, it seems, is going to turn out to be another Van Vogt.

Yours,

AL WEINSTEIN.

OH! YOU MASHER!

373 Chenango St.
Binghamton, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

How many times, I've taken up my pen to write to you I do not know, but I know that for twelve years I've been an avid reader of all magazines in this line.

I am one of those rare people who is an unscientific, science-fiction fan. I readily admit that my interest in this kind of fiction comes from the Buck Rogers comics, though I find them dull and uninteresting today.

I read the stories for the stories sake. Scientific data is all Greek to me and I don't even try to understand it. This I imagine is true of a great many of your readers, so if an unlettered girl can comment on your stories here goes.

In the Winter 1945 issue you have two stories that vie for top honors this time. I'm not going to say which is best for I don't know. *The Great Green Blight* by Emmett McDowell and *Man-nih* by Gardner F. Fox both kept me with my nose buried in the book, when I should have been doing other things.

Passage to Planet X by Henry Hasse came next. I felt that George Ketrík would be an interesting man to know.

As to the rest, they were fair, but *The Ultimate World* seemed rather pointless, for somehow I just can't picture man ever going to sleep as a nation. I think they would find something to do to give them a reason to live.

In the Visigraph the best letters were written by Larry Shaw, Guy Trucano, Jr. (I'm a Republican, too), and Lionel Innman. I agree with him that there are many great writers in the field of fantasy fiction. In closing I like your magazine, so keep it coming.

Sincerely,

GRACE MASHER.

MISS BRONX SAYS—

130 W. 183d St.
Bronx 53, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Volume 3 of PLANET STORIES is off to a very good start. Now if the other eleven issues are as good—!

The Great Green Blight by McDowell was a fine story, with merely adequate illustrations, and a terrible title. As I recall, the blight was rust-colored, and even so, the title gave away the ending to anyone with an elementary knowledge of botany. But I like the story.

Steel Giants of Chaos by Adams had an interesting idea, but it was run into the ground

with overuse. The illustrations were pleasantly primitive; was that intentional?

Passage to Planet X was another variation on the old theme of men fleeing from tyrants in one place and finding others elsewhere. However, Hasse's skill in characterization made it an excellent story. The picture was not good.

MAN-nth was the gem of the entire issue. I have come across good stories before in *PLANET*, but no novelet as good as this. Fox deserves a medal for this story. I don't know if the idea is scientifically possible, but it was carried to a remorselessly logical end. Doolin's pictures, though inaccurate, were enough above the average to classify them as good.

Concerning *The Diversifal*, all I can say is that Rocklynne hasn't departed from his usual high standards. But why this fine story had to be afflicted with such an awful picture—! Time-travel stories frequently give me a headache; this was a very pleasant exception.

The Ultimate World was the ultimate in irony. Neat tale, neatly executed. The illustration was decidedly above the average.

Venusian Invader had a deceptive title; nevertheless it was a good story. Is Sternig a new author? The name is unfamiliar.

As seems to be customary for the Ringers, the drawing was good and the joke was not. Oh for the days when Guy Gifford used to write letters that were really funny!

In re the Visigraph, the best letters (in my opinion) were those by Lionel Innman, Chad Oliver, and Larry Shaw. The first two were good because they had something to say; the last was the most delightfully nutty letter I've seen in a long time. And as far as the bug-eyed monsters are concerned, we couldn't get rid of them with anything short of an atomic bomb—the artists appear so devoted to them—therefore, why not allow them their little moment of triumph?

Sincerely,

ROSE JACOBOWITZ.

O.K. GUYS—GET TOGETHER!

1505 A St. N. E.,
Washington 2, D. C.

DEAR EDITOR:

This is my first attempt at criticism and it may be my last—anyway I am sticking my neck out for the reply. "If you don't like the stories then why read them—they're all alike."

Years ago I read the series of Martian adventures of John Carter by Edgar R. Burroughs and have been hoping to recapture the thrill those stories gave me. So far I have not succeeded. It may have been my age but I never give up hope.

Most sf magazines mix science and fiction so that there's fiction where science should be and vice versa. There are those stories where the author is so overcome by his own cleverness in giving scientific detail that the fiction part is lost.

Then there should be a standard space geography. That is my main objection. Author A depicts Mars as a jungle. Author B has Mars ultra civilized. Arthur C has Mars entirely deserted and author D rings in an entirely unheard of planet in connection with Mars.

It is true that one man's guess about Mars is as good as another's, but somehow the stories lose all their effectiveness. Would it be possible for those who write *PLANET* stories to get together on a geography?

Yours truly,

E. S. WRANEK.

POOR CIRCULATION

2307 10th St.
Columbus, Ga.

DEAR EDITOR:

My spleen is vent. (Ed: Sorry to hear that.). Now for good, *clean* constructive criticism. Don't laugh, not yet. There is one author I think *PLANET* should have a lot of. His stories would truly stimulate the mag. That author's name is—ha—ha—ha—Millard Grimes. Okay, now you can laugh. Ugh. (Ed: More spleen?).

While I am in such a gay mood, I think I shall ridicule the cover a bit. It isn't bad, in fact it's the best you've had for quite a spell. I especially like the color scheme. But the girl, who, although quite charming, no doubt, does not belong on the cover of a mag like yours. I'm just wondering how much your circulation would increase if you would do away with your "cover girl." (Ed: No cover gals—no circulation. I mean me.) With all respect to Larry Shaw, I will say I'm not against having bems on the cover. They are really symbols of sf. But why not have just one, well-drawn bem with a nice colorful background, instead of trying to tell a story with your cover. Or have one man falling as he is rayed from above. In other words, simple covers.

Now, for some real, deserving praise.

Ah, the stories. They really had some meat on 'em this ish, just like old times. All were good, but tops was McDowell's novel. This boy can really, and I do mean REALLY, paint good characters. At least to my feeble literary brain. These characters, especially Jennifer, were almost as good as the ones in McDowell's *Red Witch*.

The Visi was excellent this time, although it had been falling off. A number of oldtimers were back, but there are still many of them missing. (1) Oliver—for writing again. (2) Shaw—same. (3) Terrio—for the hit parade of PS stories. I, like Terrio took a census of my PSs and also have a line-up of favorites. I sincerely hope you will print this list. Maybe it will encourage others to send in their list of top tales. My PSs are limited but I have every issue since March 1943 and so all of my choices come from the issues following this one.

1. *Lazarus Come Forth*—Bradbury. Probably no one will agree with me on this, but this story had an ENDING. What an ending.

2. *Wanderers of the Wolf Moon*—Bond. One of the few stories I've read in *PLANET* that I was truly sorry when it ended.

3. *Alcatraz of the Starways*—Depina and Hasse. If only they could get back together. Any chance?

4. *Crypt—City of the Deathless One*—Kuttner. Another good close.

5. *Mr. Meek Plays Polo*—Simak. Read it over again, you'll really get a kick out of it.

6. *One Against the Stars*—Garson. I'm just a sucker for tragic ends.

7. *Jewel of Bas*—Brackett. Brackett has written so many good ones. She's my favorite author, but where has she been lately?

8. *Red Witch of Mercury*—McDowell. Good characters.

9. *Citadel of Death*—Selwyn. The best of the thud and blunder tales.

10. *Joe Carson's Weapon*—Adams. It was so different.

This list was made before I read the present issue, so naturally its stories do not count. If they had *Green Blight* would have been in the first ten for sure. And maybe *Steel Giants of Chaos*.

Best single ish—Summer 1944.

Best cover—Fall 1943.

I'll not say what the best inside illo was but take a look at the small one by Kiemle on page 85 of the Summer 1945 ish.

Sincerely,

MILLARD GRIMES.

P. S.—Sorry I went over the prescribed two pages but I wanted very much to get in that list with comments.

(Ed. note: You're forgiven, Millard. But take care of that spleen, will you, kid?).

GRAB HIM, GALS

S. S. Robert Rogers,
at anchor,
Port of New York.

DEAR EDITOR:

As this is my first fan letter, I'd better start off with some personal history. I am a member of the merchant marine. My family is in Minnesota. (Mother, father and ten brothers and sisters.) I'm free and 20, single, but available. If your secretary is blonde, 18, 5 ft. 8 inches, and 115 pounds or so, send her my address. (Ed: We'll do that.) I first started reading SF when I was nine years old. My family has always considered me a bit soft between the ears for reading "that trash," but I think I'm vindicated now. I was glad to meet my old friends, the B E Ms and needle-gun, but whatever became of the rocket pistol? Years ago every story bristled with them. Oh, well, time marches on.

It seems as if I heard of Chad Oliver before. If I ever get down Galveston way, tell him I'll drop in and say hello. Now to rate the stories:

1. *The Great Green Blight*. The idea of intelligent plants was okay.

2. *The Ultimate World*. A new treatment of an old theme and theory. Fine.

3. *The Venusian Invader*. Fast moving, well constructed. Orchids.

The rest of them are good, but nothing extra, except perhaps *Man-nih*. That was a good story, although the theory of straight light appears slightly crooked to me.

Sincerely,

LAWRENCE COLLISON.

MONSTER-MINDED

4711 Verdun Ave.,
Verdun, Quebec.

DEAR ED:

Do you realize that I was never actually sure what a Bem was? Sure, everyone talked about them but no one bothered to explain what they were. I used to lie awake at nights, my feeble brain striving to puzzle out the mystery. And soon my parents would tip-toe in, their brows wrinkled with worry, and softly ask what was troubling me. In a voice fraught with emotion, I would look up at them and say, "Bem!" Then with a sad shake of their heads they would quietly walk away.

So you see, something had to be done. So I sat down and patiently deciphered "Bem." B—brute, E—energetic, M—monster. I had it! A Bem is an energetic brute of a monster. Then I picked up the Winter issue of PLANET and there he was, a beautiful green Bem, doing heavens knows what with a partly-clad beauty. Ah! Parkhurst, I thank you!

Now we come to my thoughts (I really have those things) on the stories.

1. *The Great Green Blight*. Swell! I have no other words to describe it, and for once I have no kicks.

2. *MANnih*. I liked this almost as much as the first one. I got all tangled up in that hyper-space business, but I finally made it back to earth.

3. *Passage to Planet X*. Not enough action. You always feel on the outside of this story, it just didn't get me. Or do I make myself confusing?

4. A toss-up between *The Ultimate World* and *The Diversifal*. No comments.

5. *Venusian Invader* was just a brain-teaser. A sort of who-done-it, only this time it was a where-is-the-body.

And now I'll lay down my arsenic-tipped pen until next time.

Fan-atically yours,

GERRY WILLIAMS.

A HEARTY BURP

84 Baker Avenue,
Dover, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR:

Although—yea—many moons have passed since yours truly last sent a letter PLANET-ward, I have been following the progress of the mag with interest and a certain amount of anxiety. To be sure, PS is definitely on the upswing with such memorable tales as Fox's *The Last Monster* and the exceptional contributions of Brackett and De Pina. Still, I kinda miss the old days when rip-roarin' adventure went hand-in-hand with the human interest element, and yarns with a radically new twist weren't frowned upon. That was the hey-day of Rocklynne and Moskowitz, and even Binder's vastly overrated *Vasals of the Master World*.

I always hie me down to the newsstand the first of every third month, and this time was no exception. The Winter issue was piled high upon the groaning mag-rack. That cover! I like it, though. I confess to a secret love of bems. Color-scheme is indeed attractive—but, tsk, the hair of the heroine seems to be of a slightly greenish tint. Hmmm.

Artwork seems to be on the usual standard. Kiemle and Murphy are perhaps the best of the lot, though the chap who illustrated Hasse's tale shows promise. The Ringers were cute.

The Visigraph still reigns as top letter column in the field. But, dash it all, there were too many brief listings of stories in order of preference. This is okay; still, I know damned well nobody gives a hoot as to which stories in this issue I liked.

Lew Sherlock's letter seems to go off the deep end as to science. Ah, well. Perhaps somebody will take him up on it and we'll have a nice juicy discussion of physics. Goody, goody, joy, joy.

Chad Oliver's letter was interesting, as per usual, I regret that I'm not so enthused as Chad is over Cummings' writings. Still, the guy has written some classics of stf in the pre-historic days. Wish he'd keep it up.

Elsner's letter was good. He has my vote for first place.

Vernon Cooper gets second.

In third place, my sympathies are torn 'twixt Guy Trucano and the utterly mad humor of Larry Shaw. Call it a tie, if you will.

Lionel Innman's letter gives us some food for thought. However, it seems rather fanciful that any of the stuff being currently dished out

by a handful of SF pulps can be in any way considered as lasting literature. Even Weinbaum's work is hardly deserving of the term "classic," while such greats as Merritt and Lovecraft rarely wrote anything that could be classed as science-fiction. About the only recognized classics of stf that can be given as an example of the literary quality of futuristic fiction are some of the novels of H. G. Wells. Come now, Lionel—you can't class Poe as a science-fiction author, unless you consider such mildewed classics as *The Great Ball-n Hoax* or the more impressive *Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* as SF. There is always the question, of course, as to just where the dividing line lies between stf, fantasy, and weird fiction. To be sure, Shakespeare wrote several plays that are *fantastic*, yet fantasy and science-fiction are two different things entirely. At least, according to my book. Even Kipling wrote a number of excellent stories of the supernatural—particularly *They* and *The Return of Imray*. At any rate, Innman's communique was interesting, and the kind the Viz should have more of. This topic, however, might make a better fanzine article than a subject for open discussion in a letter column. Like I've just been doing. Ha.

Gentle hint to a certain editor: *When is PLANET going bi-monthly again now that the war's over?* Ha, in times gone by, the editors could merely shake their heads when any such suggestions were proffered, solemnly pointing out that the paper shortage made such thoughts impossible. But now—well, we'll see. . . .

Oh, before I forget it; the new design on the spine of the magazine is viddy, viddy nice. It deserves a hearty belch of appreciation. Can do: ULP—BURP!

With these dubious words of wisdom, I sink once more into the murky slime and ooze to dwell in sober contemplation upon the great mystery as to what makes people read science-fiction anyway. . . . Sincerely,

JOE KENNEDY.

HAPPY GENIUS RETURNS

2302 Avenue O,
Brooklyn 10, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Half a volume of PLANETS have come tumbling off the press since I've last taken the musty cover off this triper to pound out a note to the Visigraph. Now, I suppose I'm an atavist—a throwback—and once again the spell has come upon me. So, creeping out of my shell—I emerge, the *Happy G.* of old, a bit worn by the ways of life perhaps—but ready once again for the riors of a cruise through mystery, through terror stark and unreal—through the *Visigraph*!

All fans please note: This Mr. Whitehorn is a nice guy—young, and pleasant—and he likes the same stories that we do! You can expect a new era of PLANET STORIES with tales of scope, and vastness, and atmosphere—which came straight from the lips of THE EDITOR. Well, almost straight, anyway. . . . P. S.—Mr. Whitehorn is also crazy about little white peppermints—you know, the kind with the hole in the middle and he sits around munching them all day, while rejecting manuscripts, drawings, paintings, etc.

The thing that really brought me out of my mental lethargy long enough to type this letter was Ross Rocklynne's short story, *The Diversifal*. It is different from any story published in PS to date. It does not follow the general trend

of PLANET's formula. It—to say things mildly—was a classic. It was so good as a matter of fact, as to be *un-pulp-ish*. It is the very best thing printed in PLANET since Binder's unforgettable *Vassals* so long ago. From the above sentences, you may perhaps be led to believe that I liked it. AND HOW!!!

You have discovered a very good writer in Gardner F. Fox. His *Man-nth* is really an excellent bit of work, and different, too. More.

There wasn't really a bad story in the entire Winter issue. McDowell did a very nice job with his "novel"—and it sure was good to see the long-awaited return of Henry Hasse.

Poor Walton—he of *The Ultimate World*—he must be a down-trodden individual indeed—to think of civilization and life—and, and EVERYTHING—the way he did. A good yarn, though—and for BW's sake, I hope he doesn't feel that way in real life. Why should he accept your pay-check? Why eat? Why do anything? It's all pointless, a waste of cosmic time. Why live? Bah! *A waste of cosmic time!* A boring existence worth not a darn.

As for the art work—well—WHYIN'ELL mention the cover!—sniff, sniff—it'll get us nowhere. Murphy is good, verily so. So is Potter, who you seemed to have canned several issues back. Sadly, I notice that Doolin is still hanging around. All in all, you can use a couple of new ink-slingers—or a return of some of the old boys.

With less than half a double-spaced page to go, I'd better start condensing this material. So:

Give Visiprizes to Oliver (glad you're back, Chad—an' look, I'm here too!), Trucano, and the—uh—*desperate* Mr. Shaw. . . . Atomic Power here, and the end of the war. . . . What's next to leave science-fiction and become reality? . . . the Happy Genius, perhaps! . . . "No, no"—says a normal human as he leaps off his window sill—"humanity could not stand that!"

Fans! Drop that bottle of iodine! Slit not your throat with yon razor! Despair not! Be happy and rejoice! Utopia is at hand! The Happy Genius has returned to Visidom!

Cordially,

MILT LESSER.

NEW FAN

723 Texas Avenue,
San Antonio 1, Texas.

DEAR EDITOR:

Just finished reading your mag and enjoyed every minute of it and have been enjoying it for the past three issues. This is the first time I've taken my pen in hand to write and tell you of my likes and dislikes.

I'll start with the cover, which is the first thing I saw and I've always heard you should start with the first of anything and continue on.

After reading all the stories I then looked at the cover again but I failed to see any connection between the cover and any story in the magazine. Oh, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying it's not good, because I think it is, but it has no connection with any story and I think the cover should come from one of the stories anyway. Don't you think so? How about that Visigraph fans?

Here's my ratings of the stories:

1. *The Great Green Blight*—McDowell. Very good. Action all the way through. How about some more?
2. *Man-nth*—Fox. Enjoyed this very much. Wished it had of been longer. Nice plot.
3. *Passage to Planet X*—Hasse. Ketrik

sounds very interesting. Would like to read more of his adventures.

4. *The Diversifal*—Rocklynne. Something different. If only he could have someone to tell us when not to take a wrong step. Well, we do, come to think of it, our conscience, if we stop and think.

5. *Steel Giants of Chaos*—Adams. Lots of adventure and very exciting. Enjoyed it a lot.

6. *Venusian Invader*—Sternig. Good detective story.

7. *The Ultimate World*—Walton. Just didn't like it.

Guy Gifford's "The Ringers" was amusing; the pictures were pretty good, especially 2 of them. Page 71 by Pious and page 37 by Hollingsworth. These are good for action. But the ones on page 99 and page 63 are my favorites. The Ringer Boys gets tacked up in my *Bedroom*.

In reading the Vizigraph letters, I find one from San Antonio, my own home town, and I thoroughly agree with him in his idea of a small card to acknowledge our small contributions to the P. S. mag. I'm sure they would, and I would, too, be willing to send a penny post card along.

Concerning George Fox, Norman Ruggles and Richard Rosen. They write pretty rotten gripe letters, but I've always heard there's one in every crowd.

Favorite letters are: Edwin Syler's Prophecies, and may they never come true. Chad Oliver, I quite agree with you about Roy Cummings. I liked his *Juggernaut of Space* very much.

Sincerely,

MILDRED A. WARD.

A WELL-WISHER

Toronto, Ontario.

DEAR EDITOR:

After I mention the fact that this is my first letter to PLANET STORIES, and also that *The Last Monster* by Gardner F. Fox was the best story in the Fall issue, I will start on the Winter 1945 number.

As for the front cover, it met with my full approval. That enviable monster sure knows how to pick 'em. Man, if only my luck was as good! But then again, I must lack something of his. Could . . . could it be his tentacles?

Now for the stories. Three stand out as excellent. *Passage to Planet X* by Henry Hasse comes first, affording me the most enjoyment. It had everything that makes up a worthwhile yarn—action, excitement, suspense, good dialogue. Next is James R. Adams' *Steel Giants of Chaos*, followed by *The Great Green Blight* by Emmett McDowell. Those stories alone were worth the price of the magazine.

Considering the illustrations, my vote goes to C. A. Murphy. I like his style. Is there any chance at all of obtaining the work of Virgil Finlay, Alex Schomburg, Frank R. Paul? Those are the masters. R. S. Pious did a good job on page seventy-one.

PLANET STORIES has a very, very fine readers' page in the Vizigraph, in which a marked friendliness and comradery prevails. I can't help but notice it.

Well, summing up your publication, I consider it one of which you can be justly proud. I find a sort of air about it comparable with those pioneer science fiction magazines of the late twenties.

Keep up the good work, and the very best of luck.

Sincerely yours,

A. SAUNDERS.

SAVER OF WOMEN

Dickinson, N. Dak.

DEAR EDITOR:

Here we go again. Why is it that in every issue there is someone in the Vizigraph who has to disagree with me on my most fanatic-minded subjects: Ray Cummings, the type of letter in the Viz. and the cover. In the past, and in spite of myself, I have retained some vestige of respect and fondness for Ray Karden. Just look in the back issues, and you'll find it proven. But now he opens up on the covers, saying the latest one was N. G., and one of the reasons was because it followed the old pattern. I should like to ask in a very mild and controlled tone of voice, "*Just what in H— is the matter with that old pattern on man, woman, and BEM?*" Any cover must more or less follow a pattern, of a spaceship, triangle, etc. The triangle pattern must be pleasing to a good many people. Of the thousands who buy the mag, there must be a good share who either like this cover, or at least don't care enough to say anything about it. I for one like it. I can see where others would not like it, but I also have an idea that a good many who do write in about it, just write to have something to beef about.

And now to bring the tears to the eyes of this issue's authors. To McDowell, for his *Great Green Blight*, I can give nothing but praise. As likewise to Fox for *Man-nth*. Both of them tie for first place, by far the best stories in the issue. I liked *Man* a little bit better, although I couldn't tell you why. Adams and *Steel Giants of Chaos* runs a close second. It really should have been saved for first place in another issue, or are all the issues henceforth to be as good as this one was. I hope so. Rocklynne's *Diversifal*, and Walton's *Ultimate World* are next, ties. Both rather disappointed me, not because they were not excellent stories, but because of the way they ended. Not a happy ending which is the usual thing. Because of this difference, they were more interesting than they probably would have been. Sternig's *Venusian Invader* takes last place, but it is still nothing to be ashamed of. In many other issues the story would have been well up on the list, but when the other blood and thunder stories were so much better, it didn't stand a chance.

I have a word of comfort and pity for Shaw and his dangerous bug-eyed monster. It is this. In that dim future of which he speaks, there was a revolt among the bug-eyed monsters. They began to think that occasionally they should be allowed to keep the heroines, without the boy friends butting in. The rest of the BEMs promptly decided that rather than let such a horrible thing happen they would ban themselves from covers. That is why the thing which visited you insisted that you should write in favor of the monsters. If enough people want them, in any way, they can have their women, and stay on the covers. Also, another word of comfort to Shaw: if your friend gets too menacing, mix yourself a bromo, and take a cold shower. It usually works.

Oh, by the way, if any of you intelligent fans look at the first part of this masterpiece, you'll notice that I am in favor of the Triangle. The reason for this, you see, is that if people want the Triangle, they will keep us normal BEMs on the cover, and at the same time will have their women protected by the hero. If, like Shaw, they write only for the BEMs, they will lose their hero, and also the women. Sorta involved ain't it?

So I as president of the United Society for the Protection and Perpetuation of All Lawabiding BEMs, earnestly ask you to quit panning the Triangle. Help save our victims!

Sincerely,

GUY TRUCANO, JR.

ONE OF YOUR FAVORITES

Springboro, Pa.

DEAR CW:

Want to add a bit about last ish of PLANET. Just because I write a little doesn't mean I don't enjoy reading them, too. And since I get panned quite frequently I'd just as soon pan back. Incidentally the *Steel Giants* yarn in the last issue parallels my switched egos in *Survival*, not yet published, to an amazing degree. Wish now I had sold it under my Gene Ellerman monicker. It's odd how often hero's names, story ideas, and plots sprout in several authors' imaginations at the same time. Seen it happen dozens of times. Art Burks mentioned it in a *Writer's Digest* article.

Liked *Green Blight*, *Man-nth*, *Vesuvian Invader* and *Planet X* the best. The other three were good stories, too, but not up to the others it seemed to me. The Viz is rolling along in the same old rut again. With Asimov gone and Buchanan silenced or silent, something new is needed. PLANET's letter column was unusually interesting when the mag started. Then the plague of nicknames and wisecracks(?) came upon us—but is gradually fading again—and now maybe the grade of letters will go up. Might I suggest a puzzle to increase the quality and quantity of letters would be this—publish two of your stories without author's names and give the first correct identifications a couple of originals. Fans brag they can spot an author, an established one at least, by his language. I wonder! Might be tho' you'd be snowed under—so forget I mentioned it.

Once, just once, I'd like a cover sans humans and pink flesh where space-suiting should be applied. How about a couple of other male and female monickers pitching woo, or a spacer making port? I know it's the policy of the mag to have the romantic angle pictured, but an occasional offtrail would attract readers who shy off from the nuder gender as pictured on the covers. Most of the yarns aren't even slightly sexy so I fail to get the connection, but then I'm notoriously dense about a lot of things. Inside illustrates are better than average, and now that I've blowed off steam I must confess this Winter cover is rather attractive—comely wench and the hero is not in the foreground—in fact I like it! It still goes, tho', that lots of potential readers get the wrong idea.

Wasted plenty of your time as it is so I better sign off. We stfans are a mouthy breed! Time wasted on correspondence would build a few gross of novels I imagine!

Sincerely,

BASIL WELLS.

FRIENDLY FEM FAN

2120 Beechwood Rd.
Little Rock, Ark.

DEAR EDITOR:

I am 16 years old and a student of Little Rock High School. I've been reading your mag for three years now and I love it. Just lately I've

been reading the *Vizigraph* and found out how entertaining it can be too. Those letters which give the authors ratings of the stories aren't very interesting though.

The Winter edition was grand. Only one story didn't have much plot, action, or description—*The Ultimate World*.

As to the cover: I'm all in favor of beautiful girl (with few clothes since that seems to be the style), hero, and villain; but I do think the cover ought to either illustrate the story accurately or else be about something not in the mag at all. Novel idea, don't you think? Your last cover showed the plant man with octopus-like arms while in the story the plant men had five leafy fingers. Besides, that coloring!

Sometime you ought to let your artist read the whole story, select a dramatic action scene that contains the lady, hero, and villain; and then draw it as described by the author.

If I were an artist, my cover would have been an illustration from *Man-nth* (about the best story in the mag). Jonathan stands on the sanded arena in front of his ivory throne. His face is beaded with sweat and in his hand is a baseball bat. The lovely lavender lady, with her hair loose and an expression of incredulity on her face, stands off to one side of him. Morka Kar, laughing derisively, is seated on his ebony throne. In front of both thrones are the closed manomachy caskets. In the background, the white marble benches filled with watching thousands. Rosy pillars rise from the arena, and in the blue of the sky the black flames burn.

Vernon Cooper's idea of a post card to acknowledge letters received is pretty good. Therefore I enclose a stamped, addressed card to see if this ever reaches anybody (Ed.: The card, incidentally, was answered.)

The only real objection I have to PLANET is that it comes out so seldom! Dan Wilhite was quite correct in saying that Arkansans can get theirs without fear of ridicule. I buy mine on Main Street right in front of the Commercial National Bank.

Sincerely,

GLORIA ERICKSON.

? () \$

1450 E. 19th St.
Brooklyn, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Gazing at the latest PLANET STORIES I see the same old theme. A guy, a gal and a B.E.M. Although this latest one could be called a L.A.M. (Long Armed Monster). Even though your gals aren't overdressed, at least they have more on than the other mags have. (Ed. Note: Do they? Shucks!) Not that I mind, but my mother, you know. The cover is purty good. But, why are all your covers so rough? (Ed. Note: We walk on 'em after we buy 'em. Gives 'em distinction.)

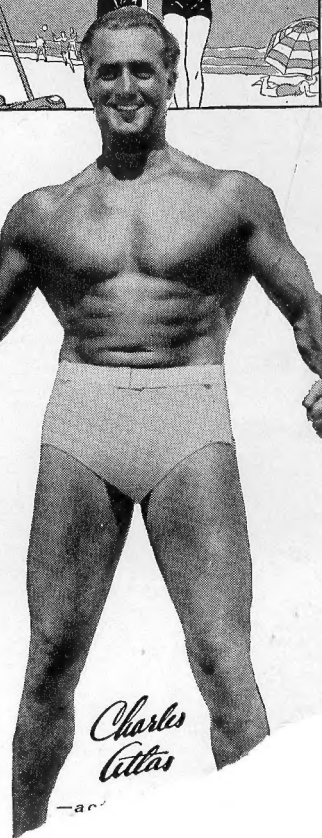
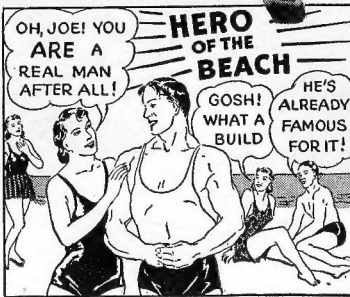
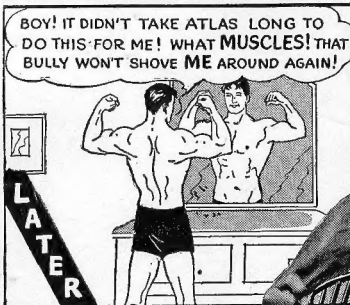
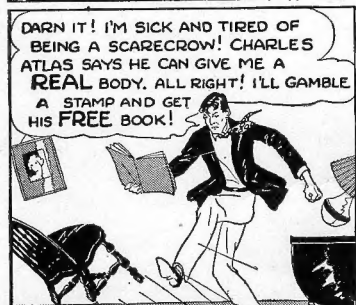
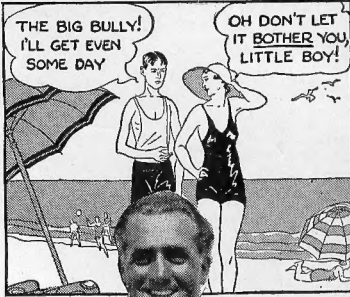
Now, the stories . . . 1. *The Great Green Blight*—Very interesting. Liked it very much. 2. *Steel Giants of Chaos*—Started off good. The rest was a letdown. 3. *Passage to Planet X*.—Good. 4. *MANnth*—Excellent!! 5. *The Diversifal*—Different. I enjoyed it. 6. *The Ultimate World*—Not bad, not good. 7. *Venusian Invader*—½!!-??-|-|; to Mr. Sternig. *The Ringers*—I liked it. "The *Vizigraph*"—Swell! It's nice and long. That's what I like about it so much.

Sincerely,

HOWARD GABRIEL.

**HOW JOE'S BODY
BROUGHT HIM**

FAME INSTEAD OF SHAME



**I Can Make YOU A New Man, Too
in Only 15 Minutes A Day!**

If YOU, like Joe, have a body that others can "push around"—if you're ashamed to strip for sports or a swim—then give me just 15 minutes a day! I'll PROVE you can have a body you'll be proud of, packed with red-blooded vitality! "Dynamic Tension." That's the secret! That's how I changed myself from a spindle-shanked, scrawny weakling to winner of the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

**"Dynamic Tension"
Does It!**

Using "Dynamic Tension" 15 minutes a day, in the privacy of your own room, begin to put on muscle. Measure your chest, your back, fill out your legs. Before you know it, NATURAL

make you a finer specimen of REAL MANHOOD than you ever dreamed you could be! You'll be a New Man!

FREE

T-



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gives you valuable experience. Provides amplitude-modulated signals for test and experiment purposes.



RADIO SERVICING pays good money for full time work. Many others make \$5, \$10 a week **EXTRA** fixing Radios in spare time.

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I start sending **EXTRA** help you make **EXTRA** part time while you learn from my radio



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You build this SUPERHETERODYNE

CIRCUIT that brings in local and distant stations. You get practical experience putting this set through fascinating tests.

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